

**TAKEN**  
**Tori Carrington**



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**Taken**

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Sassy heroines and irresistible heroes embark on sizzling sexual adventures as they play the game of modern love and lust. Expect fast paced reads with plenty of steamy encounters. The game was sex – and she played to win! In Seline Sanborn's opinion, her latest con was a thing of beauty – mind-blowing sex, enough cold cash to keep her in diamonds and a gorgeous mark who would never know what hit him. What a rush! And she was sure she'd got away with it. After all, it was just small change to sexy tycoon Ryder Blackwell. There was no way he'd consider tracking her down. But even Seline's wildest fantasies couldn't prepare her for what happened next!

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**Her proximity brought to life every part of him,**

left him longing to kiss her lips and snake his arms around her slender waist and pull her tight against him. Take up where they'd left off.

"Where would you like it, ma'am?" Jeeves appeared next to them with a silver tray filled with teacups and scones and clotted cream and jams.

Seline closed her eyes. "Remind me to talk to you about your awful sense of timing, Jeeves."

The butler grinned at her, as if he believed his timing was perfect, as he put the tray down on the table near the long sofa. "Yes, ma'am."

Just like that they were alone again.

And Ryder became doubly aware of how very close she was.

And did something he definitely hadn't planned to do. At least not consciously.

He kissed her.

*TORI CARRINGTON*

*Romantic Times BOOKreviews* Career Achievement Award-winning husband-and-wife duo Lori and Tony Karayianni are the power behind the pen name Tori Carrington. Their over thirty-five novels include titles for Mills & Boon® Blaze® and Special Edition lines. They call Toledo, Ohio, home base, but travel to Tony's home town of Athens, Greece, whenever they can. For more information on the couple, their books and where they plan to appear next with a fresh batch of Tony's Famous Baklava in hand, visit [www.toricarrington.net](http://www.toricarrington.net).

Dear Reader,

"Well-behaved women rarely make history." This Laurel Thatcher Ulrich quote is one of many that grace our office walls. Women who push the boundaries of accepted behaviour are a popular theme for us, so when it was proposed that, along with Leslie Kelly and Julie Elizabeth Leto, we consider adding members to THE BAD GIRLS CLUB, we immediately signed on.

In *Taken*, Seline Sanborn is a sexy con artist. And self-made millionaire playboy Ryder Blackwell is the handsome mark. When Seline breaches his company's inner circle by posing as a successful account executive, Ryder falls for her hard. A one-night stand quickly turns into full obsession. But what happens when he wakes up to find the angel in his bed gone...along with an interesting chunk of his company's capital? Is he capable of redefining everything he believes about life and love and the law in order to be the one man skilled enough to earn Seline's trust and steal something worth far more than money – her heart?

We hope you enjoy every twist and turn in Seline and Ryder's unconventional journey towards happily-ever-after. We'd love to hear what you think. Contact us at PO Box 12271, Toledo, OH 43612, USA (we'll respond with a signed bookplate, newsletter and bookmark), or visit us on the web at [www.toricarrington.net](http://www.toricarrington.net).

Here's wishing you love, romance and *hot* reading.

*Lori & Tony Karayianni aka Tori Carrington*

# TAKEN

BY  
TORI CARRINGTON



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

We dedicate this book to fellow lifetime  
Bad Girls Club members Leslie Kelly, Julie Leto  
and our shared editor Brenda Chin. And to bad  
girls everywhere: keep knocking down those  
walls and breaking through those glass ceilings.

1

IT WAS a temptation she couldn't resist.

Heat slid over her skin, igniting every nerve ending, making her hyper-aware of each breath she drew in. Tension. Anticipation. Longing. All combined in her muscles, clamored for release. Demanded she unleash the more primal part of herself kept under wraps for far too long.

It was July, it was hot and Seline Sanborn sat alone in her leased glossy-black Audi TT roadster convertible with the top down, her Dior shades parked on her nose, tendrils of blond hair stuck to her chin and lips. Yearning, pure and strong, shuddered through her. How long it had been since she'd allowed herself the indulgence of taking off her mask? One month? No, it was closer to two. Two months since she'd taken on the identity of conservative Carol Lambert, senior account executive moved to New York City from Seattle, Washington. Eight weeks in which she'd gained the confidence of the higher-ups at Blackwell & Blackwell Industries. Sixty days since she'd traded a lifestyle with few boundaries for long twelve-hour days, and nights spent reviewing carefully laid out plans rather than enjoying romantic sunsets with a special someone.

Then again, it had been time immeasurable since she'd spent a romantic anything with anyone.

Which probably explained why she'd decided to take the sporty rental car to her uptown lunch meeting rather than a taxi. And why she'd let the top—and her hair—down afterward.

Of course, the success of the meeting had also contributed to her desire to cut loose. If all corporate endeavors could be as powerfully engaging, she'd seriously consider hanging up her hat and going legit. The problem was that there was much more paperwork and tedium involved in the life of a corporate exec than big-ticket deals like the one she'd just brokered on behalf of Blackwell & Blackwell.

Or rather, just brokered on behalf of herself using a shell company she'd anonymously staffed through a temporary employment agency. A company that would cease to exist by this time tomorrow, guaranteeing her rush would survive at least as long...and the security the funds from she'd make off with even longer.

Which was why she much preferred the title of con artist. Forget that the job was the only one she knew. What other position would give her quick access to the type of money she needed? Not even Carol Lambert's nice salary could cover an overhead that went beyond the expensive leased cars and designer duds she needed for her cons. Well beyond.

Of course, the impulsiveness of her current actions went against one of her top rules, developed out of necessity: do not, under any circumstances, let your guard down until the con is over. And seeing as only a day and a half—thirty-six short hours—remained in her current job...well, her uncharacteristic recklessness was spotlighted all the more.

“It’s a car ride, that’s all,” she said quietly. “What harm can come out of a car ride?” She pressed the power button for the high-end CD player. The guitar riffs of “Radar Love” by Golden Earring instantly drowned out the cautionary voice that whispered in her ear, along with the sound of the purring engine now idling at a stoplight.

Until the rumble of another equally impressive engine turned her attention to her left. She smiled with deliberate pleasure.

It didn’t take a car lover to appreciate the sleek lines of the XK Jaguar. But seeing as she knew the 12-cylinder engine that growled beneath the attractive hood inside and out, her interest quotient notched upward.

Too bad all she could make out through the heavily tinted windows was her own reflection. Which looked damned good, if you asked her.

She tilted her head and made a play at nudging her sunglasses halfway down her nose to get a better look at the driver even though she couldn’t see him.

The response was a revving of the potent engine.

Seline righted her glasses and looked forward.

Having been raised in New York, despite the fact that she could no longer live there unless she was on the job, she knew times were few and far between when traffic opened in front of you. And this appeared to be one of those rare occasions when the big city and her many denizens offered up a precious gift of space and opportunity. She had every intention of greedily taking advantage of both.

She put the car into first gear, easing up on the clutch even as she floored the gas pedal. The car’s back end immediately jerked as the back tires spun against hot asphalt. The Jag’s engine revved louder in answer.

She watched the opposing traffic light. A moment after it turned red, and a split second before hers turned green, Seline released the brake and the Audi shot forward in a cloud of white smoke and burning rubber. She was no fool. She knew the Jag could do cartwheels around her car...if the driver was equal to her and if she played fair.

But she wasn’t known for fair. For survival’s sake, she’d learned to take full advantage of any opportunity to get ahead. In this case, literally.

She switched gears into third, then quickly into fourth, watching as the speedometer needle leapt upward.

The Jag easily caught up, staying even with her. Ahead, a taxi seemed to be at a dead stop in the middle of the road. She veered right even as the Jag swerved left, within moments the two of them running side by side again.

Seline shivered at the feel of her hair whipping around her face, the sound of the engine and electric guitar filling her ears, and the sights and smells of midtown Manhattan around her.

Damn, but this felt good. And it had been a long time since she’d felt good. Much longer than two months.

She and the Jag ran like that for another four blocks before the other driver blew his horn. She shot him a look, having noticed two lights back the white-and-blue NYPD cruiser parked at the next intersection. What she didn’t know was if the other driver would have the guts to continue the street race or if he would drop back.

To her surprise, he kept up with her, even upping the ante as he blew past her.

The stopped squad car immediately turned right and gave chase after the Jag.

Seline thrust the gear into Neutral and made a squealing right-hand turn, then another, until neither the Jaguar nor the cops were any longer visible.

*Yes.*

Seline relished the rush even as she turned the music down, slowed to the speed limit, then headed back to the offices of Blackwell & Blackwell where she would have to play Little Miss

Manners for the next four hours before knocking off work...with nothing but a saucy little smile to remind her of her brief excursion.

“THANK YOU, officer.”

Ryder Blackwell accepted the speeding ticket from the unsmiling NYPD officer then leaned back in his dormant Jaguar and watched the patrol car drive away.

He'd purposely raced by the hot babe in the Audi, hoping to place her squarely in the patrol's crosshairs rather than him.

Then she'd turned off and rather than following her, the police officer had targeted him instead.

He grinned and shook his head, thinking of the provocative blonde in the black car—the personification of every teenage boy's dream. And, apparently, a grown man's, as well.

“Can I take that for you, Mr. Blackwell?”

He'd only been a block up from the Blackwell & Blackwell building when he'd been pulled over, so the red-haired, freckled-face valet who usually parked his car had sprinted over to meet him.

Ryder got out of the XK and tossed him his keys. “Sure, O'Malley. But why don't you take her through the car wash before parking her back in the garage.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Blackwell.”

Ryder chuckled quietly as he retrieved his briefcase from the back of the Jag. He knew the nineteen-year-old valet would take the car for a spin first. But that's what hot July days were meant for. If you couldn't have a little fun in a kick-ass car on a day like this, what was the point? He would have loved the opportunity when he was O'Malley's age.

He straightened his tie and was crossing the parking-garage driveway when he was nearly hit by the woman he'd never expected to see again. Ryder squinted at her. At least he thought it was her. Gone were the trendy sunglasses. Up were the Audi's top and her wild blond hair. And if he didn't know better, he'd think she'd exchanged scarlet lipstick for neutral beige.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Blackwell,” she said, looking everything like yet nothing like the woman who'd tempted him into a ticket. “I didn't see you.”

“So, is that going to be the story?” he asked with a grin.

She looked confused.

He nodded toward where O'Malley was taking off his black hat and getting into the Jag. The tires squealed as he pulled away from the curb.

When she looked back at him, he saw a definite shimmer of challenge in her green eyes.

“I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Blackwell.”

A car pulled up behind her and the driver lay on the horn. Ryder stepped aside to let both into the parking garage, shaking his head as he went.

Carol...Carol...he repeated her name in his mind. Lambert. That's right. Her name was Carol Lambert. Coleman had hired her a couple months back.

It wasn't all that surprising that he'd had trouble remembering her name. Although she'd been present in meetings, she usually sat back from the table in a way that guaranteed he barely noticed her, rarely contributing anything, although he understood from Coleman that she was doing a hell of a job since signing on.

He stepped inside the lobby and went straight to the elevator dedicated to his top-floor offices.

Perhaps he'd have to invite the wild Ms. Lambert into his office to see how hot her personal engine ran.

DAMN, damn, damn. She *so* hadn't made that mistake. Had she?

Seline sat at her desk behind a door she never closed but had closed now, hoping against hope that what had happened earlier would stay outside the office. But even though three hours had passed, and she was just a short time away from knocking off for the day, she knew that Ryder Blackwell wasn't the forgetting kind. And judging by the hot suggestive look he'd given her, he wasn't the timid kind, either.

Of course, she already knew that. Ryder Blackwell, the sixth in a line of wealthy Blackwells—although she understood that Ryder’s grandfather had squandered a great deal of the family’s fortune...a fortune that the grandson had spent a great deal of time earning back and then some—was not only touted as one of the city’s most eligible bachelors, he was also a notorious ladies’ man, never seen with the same woman at two consecutive events.

“It’s said that men love the thrill of the chase,” he’d said in an interview with *GQ*. “But I think women are equally intrigued by a challenge.”

It wasn’t all that difficult to see why he rated high with both the ladies and the NY press. Money aside—and that was a big aside—he was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, with just the right amount of devil in his smooth grin and one deep cheek dimple. His attractiveness had been exactly the reason why she’d steered a wide berth around him. And if she couldn’t avoid contact, rather than looking up to meet his gaze, she tucked her chin into her chest and murmured responses that he had to ask her to repeat.

Then she’d gone and challenged him to a street race in the middle of Manhattan.

The telephone at her elbow rang. Seline froze and then she forced herself to answer.

“Yes, Rita?”

“Ms. Lambert, Mr. Blackwell says he’d like to see you before you leave for the day.”

“Here?”

“No. He’d like you to go up to his office. Just ring his assistant when you’re ready so she can signal the elevator.”

Seline sighed. “Thanks, Rita.”

*Signal the elevator.*

Oh, she’d known the layout of the building like the back of her hand before she’d ever set foot in it. Architectural plans were easy enough to access. But she’d never had reason to venture into Ryder Blackwell’s professional domain. And she didn’t want a reason to now. Not with such a short time remaining before a punch of a button would transfer a significant amount from Blackwell & Blackwell’s business accounts into a series of dummy front accounts and eventually make its way, untraceably, into her own.

She could pretend she hadn’t got the message. Blame the miscommunication on Rita. After all, who she was—or rather wasn’t—and why she was really here would become painfully obvious soon enough.

She swiveled restlessly in her chair. This was exactly the reason she’d established a strict set of rules to work by. And today the breaking of one of them had snowballed into the breaking of Golden Rule Number 1: Stay under the radar of the higher-ups.

And in this con they didn’t come any higher than Ryder Blackwell.

She clicked through the documents on her computer, then made a couple of notes. There was no way in hell she was going up to that office.

Seline remembered his sexy grin and her panties grew tighter. A reaction that had nothing to do with July sunshine and fast cars, and everything to do with sex and a great candidate to have some with.

2

“UH OH. I know that look.”

Ryder turned his leather chair from the clear view he had of the Empire State Building from the forty-fifth floor of the building his company owned. He considered his second-in-command and longtime best friend, John Coleman. “What look?”

Coleman sat back in the righthand guest chair and gave him a wry expression of his own. “That one that says you’re about to do something dangerous. Or stupid. Or both.”

Ryder grinned, not so much at his friend, but at himself. “I don’t know whether I should take offense or be amused.”

“Oh, God. You *are* about to do something stupid and dangerous, aren’t you?”

“When have I ever done something stupidly dangerous?”

“Oh, how about that impromptu trip to Alaska two months ago to drop from a helicopter and snowboard down some virgin mountain when we had a meeting to close the deal with Trump? Or the month before that when you disappeared so you could hike up the side of the Montserrat volcano before it was due to erupt?”

“You call that dangerous?”

“I definitely call that dangerous.”

Ryder leaned forward in his chair. “That’s because risk to you is whether or not to wear the pink tie your new wife gave you for Valentine’s Day.”

“Yes, well, someone’s got to keep their wits about them around here.”

Ryder’s mind wandered to the clock. Four-thirty.

“So what are you considering now?”

“What?”

“Isn’t there a hurricane due to hit Florida’s east coast? Are you having your surfboard waxed?”

“Nothing quite so unimaginative.”

“But you *are* considering something.”

Ryder picked up his pen and tapped it on his desk. “Maybe.”

It all depended on one very inscrutable Carol Lambert.

Granted, he’d been privileged to enjoy the company of a lot of women in his life. And he knew that outer wrappings often were deceiving. There was the raunchy pop star he’d gone out with who had pretended to be an exhibitionist sex kitten in public, but the minute he got her home she’d folded in on herself then passed out from the stress of having to put on such an act all night. He recalled having waited around until morning in that case, convinced the sex—when he got it—would be worth it. But it hadn’t been. One-on-one she’d been shy and hesitant, the exact opposite of the image she portrayed for everyone else.

Then there was the icy socialite he’d briefly—very briefly—considered marriage material. She headed the right charities, boasted the right pedigrees and was the perfect hostess of myriad social events. But behind closed doors she was a borderline nymphomaniac. She had nearly shredded his back with her nails and broken his eardrums with her loud and X-rated demands of what she wanted him to do to her for what had to be a record-breaking ten hours straight.

It had been the one and only time that Ryder had been more preoccupied with whether he’d survive what his sex partner might do to him than with the sex itself.

Then there was Carol Lambert.

He leaned back in his chair, ignoring his friend.

There was something about Carol. Something different. The first thing being that the hot lady who’d challenged him to race didn’t seem to fit her name, forget the person she turned into the minute she entered the front doors of Blackwell & Blackwell. He’d even consulted her employment records to try to solve the mystery, but nothing from her file had helped him to reconcile the two women with whom he was acquainted. *Acquainted* being the operative word.

And something he hoped to upgrade to *having intimate knowledge* of when she came to his office that afternoon.

“Should I call legal and make sure your insurance policies are up to date?” Coleman asked.

“What insurance policies?”

Coleman stared at him.

Ryder chuckled and got to his feet. “Go home to that pretty wife of yours, John, and stop being such a worrywart. You sound like a nagging mother.” He smacked his hand against his friend’s back on their way toward the door.

“Promise me you won’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Ryder raised a brow.

John sighed. “Okay, then. Promise you’ll be careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

“Why doesn’t that make me feel any better?”

The minute John was on his way down the hall to his own office, Ryder’s secretary approached. “There were three calls for you while you were occupied.” She said, offered up the message slips.

“Hold on to them, Mrs. Newman. I’ve got a meeting to make.”

“Meeting?” she asked his departing back. “I have no meeting on your agenda.”

Ryder grinned at her as he turned inside the elevator then pressed the button for the floor he wanted. “It just came up.”

IT TOOK a bit of doing, but Seline managed to push everything up by twelve hours. Which meant that the minute she stepped out of her office, the con would be done and she would be free to shuck Carol Lambert’s conservative suits and identity for good.

It also meant that her personal accounts would be that much fatter, while Blackwell & Blackwell’s accounts would be that much slimmer.

And, ultimately, it meant that she could duck out before anyone would miss her. Specifically, Ryder Blackwell.

Of course, it went without saying that she also wouldn’t have an excuse to see whether or not Ryder growled in bed as satisfyingly as the engine of his car did on the road.

But that was part of the price she paid in her line of work. It came with the territory. Even if the rules she lived by didn’t already make involvement with anyone personally connected to any company she targeted off limits, it just made plain business sense to keep her attention focused on the job rather than indulging sexual fantasies that would only endanger her and the con. No matter how delicious the temptation.

And Ryder Blackwell was the epitome of delicious and temptation.

She’d been around long enough to understand that if she were lucky there would be only a handful of men she would connect with in a way that transcended your run-of-the-mill attraction. And she’d felt that connection strongly with Ryder upon realizing who he was when he’d blocked her access to the garage. Within a nanosecond, his gaze had communicated an understanding, an awareness, to her that sometimes years with another person couldn’t accomplish. An “I see you” gaze that left her feeling...no, *knowing* that he had seen her. Not the details. Not what her favorite color was or what she was up to. But, rather, more fundamental elements. Almost as if the past, present and future had melted together to become immaterial in light of their meeting, their connection.

Oh, well. While it was certainly the first time she’d had such an experience with a mark, she had the feeling it likely wouldn’t be the last. And, probably sooner than she currently believed, she’d forget all about his electric-blue eyes and dimpled cheek and the surge of her blood every time she’d thought about him that afternoon, and use the money she’d stolen from him to further more important plans.

She stuffed the last of the items that could be connected to her inside the cavernous depths of her Louis Vuitton bag and wiped her prints from the drawer she’d closed.

“Going somewhere?”

Seline froze at the sound of Ryder’s voice. Somewhere in the back of her mind she gave herself a pat on the back for not having jumped. Even if his sudden presence was definitely of the jump variety.

Not that she hadn’t half expected him to show up at her office, despite his request through official channels to see her in his. Mostly because of that connection she’d shared with him. She’d instantly sensed that—not unlike herself—he was someone used to getting what he wanted. And he wanted her.

*Her.* The woman in the car who’d challenged him to a race. Not Carol Lambert. Although she had to remind herself that he didn’t know there was difference. A vast and damaging difference.

It had been that knowing that had prompted her to finish up her business and get out of here posthaste.

Unfortunately, she'd been two minutes too late.

Seline turned her chair to face him in the doorway, giving him her best Carol Lambert tucked-chin smile. "Hello, Mr. Blackwell. I was just getting ready to come up to see you."

"Why do I get the impression you were getting ready to leave instead?"

She tried to act surprised, but she made the mistake of meeting his stimulating gaze. And the challenge there left her incapable of ignoring the desire to rise to it.

So he thought he could handle her, did he? Thought he knew who she was and by extension thought himself up to the task of tussling with her without consequence?

She found herself smiling.

She had two weaknesses. One was for a good, clean, risky con; the other was proving to a powerful bachelor like Ryder Blackwell how powerless he truly was when it came to a woman like her.

And while she should pass on this one, she found she didn't want to.

All cons came with their risks. And so far this one had run like clockwork. Boringly like clockwork. Maybe a tryst with Ryder was just what was needed to spice it up a little bit.

"Was there something you needed to discuss with me?" she asked, getting up from her desk and coming to stand in front of him.

She watched him watch her approach. His black pupils dilated slightly as his gaze dropped first to her baggy blouse as if searching for the lacy bra underneath, then to her legs, which she knew were killer even in the low-heeled, unappealing shoes she wore.

Seline leaned forward, brushing her breasts against his chest. She had to give him credit for standing still, not giving away with a blink or an intake of breath that her actions surprised him. She picked up a file on the side table behind him, then broke contact as she put it into her bag.

"There are several things I'd like to discuss with you, Ms. Lambert."

She put her bag on the table then reached for her suit jacket hanging on the back of the door. He took it from her and she easily turned so he could help her into it. If his movements were a little more languid than the occasion called for, if his fingers lingered a little too long at the collar, against the burning skin of her neck, she wasn't going to let him see her reaction. Even though she sensed that he knew. Just as she knew that he wanted to touch her in far more intimate ways.

"I only have a few minutes," she said, turning back to face him. "I have a meeting to get to."

His gaze swept up from her neck over her chin to her lips. "Cancel it."

She smiled in a way designed to transmit that he'd just tipped his hand. "Surely whatever is on your mind can wait until morning?"

Until she was long gone and he would begin the process of discovering exactly what she'd been doing while she'd been there. And that it had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with money.

"Actually, it can't. Have dinner with me."

She picked up her bag and edged the handle up to rest over her shoulder. "Dinner? Sounds personal. Doesn't that violate the company's no-fraternization rule?"

The right side of his mouth budged upward, revealing the single dimple that made her tongue tingle with the desire to taste it. "I'll put it on my agenda to change that rule first thing in the morning. One of the benefits of being the boss."

Seline couldn't resist leaning closer to him. The new proximity filled her senses with a scent of lime that made her mouth water further. She dropped her voice to a provocative whisper. "Yes, but that still leaves the rule in effect for tonight. And seeing as I'm a new employee, I wouldn't want to do anything to endanger my position. You know, like having sex with the boss."

"Who said anything about sex?"

She tilted her head so that she was looking into his eyes. "You did. And do. Every time you look at me."

“Astute woman.”

“Shameless man.”

His chuckle sent a shiver skidding over her hypersensitive nerve endings. It had been a long, long time since mere conversation with a man had made her wet. But if the dampness between her thighs was anything to go by, Ryder had accomplished exactly that.

“Look, Mr. Blackwell—”

“Ryder.”

“No matter what guarantees you make, the truth is that sleeping with the boss is never a good idea. Chances are you’ll come in tomorrow morning having regretted our...intimacy.” She watched as he swallowed thickly. “And then where would I be? Aside from sharing the title of one-night stand with no doubt countless other women in the company?”

“I don’t sleep with employees.”

“But isn’t that what you’re proposing now?”

His grin widened. “No. I’m offering dinner.”

Seline shivered again and clamped her thighs tightly together, reveling in the luscious sensations rolling through her. “Nothing more?”

“Let’s just say that the rest...well, I’ll be offering. It’s up to you whether or not you take me up on it.”

She blinked slowly then smiled. “Your car or mine?”

3

RED-HOT. Reckless. Dangerous.

Ryder couldn’t be sure where the danger part came in. All he knew was that the instant they entered the elevator in his Upper East Side building, Carol Lambert stopped playing coy and began playing hard. Not hard to get, but hardball—letting him know exactly what she was after. Which happened to be the same thing he was after. But despite his time with the nympho socialite, he wasn’t accustomed to this unabashed display of carnal desire. Or his own feral response to it.

Carol shoved him against the mirrored back wall of the elevator, kissing him hungrily even as she pushed his suit jacket over his shoulders. One of her legs edged between his, her upper thigh pressing boldly against his erection.

Ryder rolled her so she was the one against the wall, pulling open her blouse to reveal the sexy garments underneath. The black lace should have surprised him, but it didn’t. Rather he experienced a sense of relief that the woman he’d raced on the street was evident in the racy underwear. No pretend sex kitten here. She was one hundred percent the real thing.

He grasped her right breast, pressing the circle of her areole more tightly against the lacy cup, then fastened his mouth over the fabric and the flesh beneath, drawing both deeply inside even as he worked his own leg between hers, raising his upper thigh until it met with her crotch. Bracing himself, he lifted her until she slid up the mirror. Her knee-length skirt bunched around her lush hips, revealing that she wore no stockings and that the black thong she had on was all lace.

He groaned, holding her against the wall with one hand even as he lowered to his knees, at eye level with the decadent undergarment. Dipping a finger inside the edge, he tugged the lace aside until her gloriously bare swell of flesh was exposed to his hungry gaze.

His vast experience with women left little doubt as to her arousal. Her labia were swollen, making her sex appear like a fresh fruit just waiting to be plucked. He blew lightly and watched as the skin reacted, contracting so that the pink bit of delicate flesh between her folds peeked out, tempting his tongue.

And it was his tongue he offered.

Carol moaned even as the elevator climbed up the thirty floors. He ran the length of his tongue against the slit, then flicked it over and around her clit, pulling the bud deep into his mouth. Her

hands left his hair as she braced herself against the wall. Ryder took in her provocative, half-lidded expression even as he drank deeply of her.

The scent of feminine musk, the sound of her shallow, ragging breathing, filled his senses, increasing his desire for this woman who tasted like fresh peaches and cream but was as naughty as the day was long.

He grasped her right leg and positioned it over his left shoulder, then followed suit with her left leg over his right shoulder. She quickly joined her ankles behind his neck, balancing herself against the mirror even as he dove in for another taste of her.

He was aware of her impending release and moved to delay it, moving his attention from the bud to the blooming entrance just below. So slick. So tight. He lapped her slowly, purposefully. As soon as he heard her breathing even out a bit, he traveled back up to the fleshy button and fastened his lips around it again, sucking deeply.

She came apart instantly, her legs tightening, her cry echoing against the elevator walls at the same time an electronic ding sounded.

Ryder thought she might panic at the thought that someone might see them. Instead she rode out the wave of her orgasm then collapsed against the wall, making quite the provocative image with her wild hair, her skirt bunched around her waist, her legs still crossed around his neck as he looked up at her.

She smiled at him languidly. “My, Mr. Blackwell, you do appear to have your skills.”

He chuckled as he freed her legs. She found her footing and he rose to stand next to her.

The elevator doors slid open to reveal his warmly lit, empty penthouse. During the drive home—they’d taken their separate cars—he’d called his butler Jonathon, asking for discretion. A silver ice bucket holding a bottle of champagne, a tray of chocolate-tipped strawberries and a bowl of cream and the soft strains of old Motown melodies were the only evidence that Jonathan was anywhere in residence.

“After you,” Ryder said.

For just one night Seline wanted to forget the past...forget the future. She wanted to live in this one moment, and this one moment alone.

She’d need all the help she could get. Because both the past and the future were difficult to ignore for even one night.

She looked around. She’d always appreciated a man with good taste. And Ryder obviously had it in spades.

Languidly strolling into the penthouse, hyper-aware of every nerve ending in her body, the chafing of her nipples against her bra, the throbbing of her womanhood, she took in the mammoth living and dining area, colorfully yet sparsely decorated. Probably it had been put together by an interior decorator. She snatched a strawberry from a tray and bit down on the succulent fruit even as she moved to consider a small framed Manet over an antique, ivory-inlaid banquet. A very good decorator who had taken Ryder into consideration during the planning process.

And likely Ryder had taken the decorator right on the huge ottoman that served as a coffee table between two long sofas.

She shivered.

It had been so long since she’d indulged herself with casual sex. So long that she felt her emotions exaggerating the not-unfamiliar sensations. Her elevator orgasm just as the compartment had stopped moving had rocked her to the marrow. Even now, she was uber-aware of every move Ryder made even though her back was to him.

A crystal flute was placed in front of her. She put it down on the buffet then scooted to sit on the surface, spreading her legs wantonly.

“Nice place.”

Usually when she made a comment like that, the person in question took a look around as if seeing through her eyes. Not Ryder. He trapped her gaze with his and didn't blink, secure in the knowledge that it *was* a nice place. And that it had nothing at all to do with the reason she was there.

"Thank you."

He put his flute down on the other side of her, his gaze dropping to where her blouse bowed open, then lower still to her bared thighs.

"Are you hungry?" he murmured.

"Mmm." She caught the waist of his slacks and yanked him forward, his suit jacket long since discarded by the door.

Then she set about showing him exactly what she was hungry for.

Many women she knew sorely underestimated the importance of a good kiss. And oh, did, Ryder Blackwell know how to kiss. His lips were firm yet malleable, his mouth damp but not too wet. And he didn't go for her tonsils as other men she'd known over the years had made the mistake of doing. Instead he lingered with his lips on hers, his mouth not quite open, not quite closed, his tongue dipping out briefly before he finished the kiss.

Seline grew aware of her shortness of breath. That and he hadn't touched her beyond their kiss since they'd entered the penthouse.

She scooted forward on the buffet, her softness instantly meeting his pants-covered hardness. She briefly bit on her bottom lip, an ache the size of Manhattan gaping within her. An ache that only he could satisfy.

His hands squeezed her legs near her knees then slid up. Her instinct was to throw her head back and allow him to do what he would.

Which was why she instead caught his hands, slid down from the table, then led him toward the wide, open staircase to their right. Swaying her hips suggestively, she climbed three or four steps, aware of the view he was being afforded from the back. She felt a hand on her ass and she paused, allowing the hot branding to ripple through her. Then he was pulling her toward him, forcing her to lie against the carpeted steps as he fitted himself between her thighs.

Seline groaned, welcoming his weight as she pulled at his tie and shirt, then abandoned both for the fastener to his slacks. He hungrily kissed her as she tugged his zipper down, working her hand inside his boxers until the scalding length of him filled her palm.

While their clothed fondling had left her with little doubt as to his size, it had masked how very impressive he was. She idly measured his length, finding him going well beyond the stretch of her fingers and palm together. She encircled the turgid flesh, finding that she could barely touch thumb to fingertips.

Mmm...

Seline's mouth watered with the desire to taste the silken flesh. She trailed her hand down the thick shaft, feeling his heartbeat at the root, her own heart beating hard against her chest in awareness of his reaction to her touch.

He reached for his back pocket and took out a condom while she worked his slacks down his hips, then he rid himself of the constricting material. Next was her skirt, his shirt, her blouse, his briefs, until finally they lay against the steps completely nude, the glass wall on the other side of the stairs reflecting the golden globe of the sun beginning to set off to the west. Seline helped him sheath his erection then arched her back in preparation for his entry.

Instead, he grasped her chin in his right hand, holding her still as he deeply kissed her.

Seline blinked open her eyes. Her chest contracted to the point of pain and she lost her breath.

She immediately labeled the sensation. She'd felt it only one other time. And back then it had been much more about intimacy than sex.

And she wanted strictly sex.

She switched her attention from his face to his shoulder, biting lightly as she wriggled free of his grasp and turned, climbing a couple of more steps then arching her back, presenting him with a carnal view she knew no man could resist.

She knew a moment of disappointment when he followed where she led, grasping her hips as he positioned himself from behind. But that emotion was banished to the winds as he fit the head of his penis against her opening then thrust into her to the hilt.

All coherent thought left her, and sheer sensation quickly filled the void, pressing outward until she was afraid she wouldn't be able to contain it.

So good...

He rocked against her, his sac swaying against her swollen womanhood, then withdrew, his right hand circling her hip to find the bit of flesh and give it a pinch. Seline threw back her head and moaned as he thrust again, and again, causing her bare breasts to sway, her sensitive nipples repeatedly grazing the carpeted step beneath them. His strokes grew from controlled to more frenzied as Seline bore back against him, longing for an even deeper penetration. She reached down between her legs, gently grasping his balls and coaxing him to slow his movements. Whenever he thrust, she rubbed the globes against her slick flesh, shivering at the sensation, then released so he could withdraw.

All too quickly she could no longer concentrate on the move and dropped her hand. The instant she did, he increased the frequency and urgency of his thrusts.

Flesh slapped against flesh, moans competed against groans...

Then finally she was toppling over the other side of the virtual staircase out over a vista she hadn't seen in a very long time, everything shaded in red.

SELINE lay back against the Egyptian cotton sheets. She was naked, she was spent and she was having a hard time concentrating on anything other than the delicious throbbing in her various body parts. Patches of stubble burn marred her inner thighs, her breasts and her chin. She had rug burn on her knees and elbows from the stairs. Her nipples protested when she tried to drape the top sheet over them, so she left them bare as she listened to the sound of the shower in the other room.

The purple-hued world outside the tall, floor-to-ceiling windows told her dawn would soon break. And that it was way past time to hightail it out of here. It wouldn't be too long before Coleman got to the office and discovered what she had done. While she'd built in certain mechanisms to delay the discovery, she knew Coleman was no fool and that he was also the type of dependable guy who would check account activity every morning.

She glanced toward the clock on the nightstand, finding a pillow covering it. Seline dragged it off and the clock fell with it. She picked it up from the floor.

Five forty-five. Damn.

She could count the times she'd had such great sex on two fingers. With Joey Capriotti when she was nineteen and just coming to know her own sexuality. And now.

She smiled stupidly. Yes, Ryder Blackwell was definitely no slouch in bed. She'd known men who were roaring lions in the boardroom but lazy cats in the bedroom. Not Ryder. He was as ambitious between the sheets as he was outside them. Sheets being optional.

In fact, they hadn't hit the bed until sometime after 3:00 a.m. And only then because they'd risked serious injury in the kitchen when he'd hoisted her onto the counter and knocked over a stand of butcher knives.

The shower shut off.

Seline bounced up from the bed, collected her clothes, then headed at a run for the door.

No matter how good, no sex was worth the risk of a long prison sentence.

4

WHEN RYDER had emerged from his shower to find Carol gone, he'd been amused. He'd hoped the sound of the water would wake her and entice her to slip under the multi-jet spray with him. Instead she'd left.

When she hadn't shown up to work by ten, he suspected she'd gone back to her place and fallen asleep. He thought maybe she'd be in later.

Then around eleven, John Coleman had requested an emergency meeting.

By 4:00 p.m. Ryder was furiously aware of everything one Carol Lambert had done. Only it hadn't been Carol Lambert but the sexy woman he'd slept with last night. Because Carol Lambert was a thirty-eight-year-old brunette who still lived in Washington State and hadn't transferred to New York and his company, but rather was taking extended time off to have her first child.

"How much are we looking at?" he asked Coleman.

"Three quarters of a mil."

Ryder sat back in his chair as if hit in the chest with a punching bag.

"This woman was good. She brokered a deal between Blackwell and a sham company that as of this morning no longer exists."

"Get the money back."

"Easier said than done. The instant the money hit the sham company's account it was then automatically transferred out to various other accounts, and I'm guessing even more accounts from there. The minute the money left our bank it essentially became untraceable." Coleman shook his head as he considered the printouts he held. "This woman was a pro. She knew exactly what she was doing." He looked up. "Johnstone says this was a set-up from the get go. She borrowed the Lambert woman's résumé, burrowed deep into the company, then meticulously set us up."

Ryder rubbed his face, as much to wake himself up from the nightmare he was in the middle of as to rid himself of the erotic images that kept sliding through his mind from last night.

Coleman didn't know he'd spent the night sleeping with the enemy. Sleeping—hah! They hadn't slept at all. He'd had Carol, the con artist, every which way it was possible to have a woman. Hell, he'd had more sex with her in one night than he'd had in the entire year.

And he'd been stupid enough to believe he'd be getting more of it.

And still wanted it despite what she'd done.

"Johnstone's got nearly every detective firm in Manhattan working the case now."

"So he's confident she'll be caught."

Coleman grimaced. "Look, Ry, I've never been one to mislead you. The truth is, given the professional nature of the crime, with every moment that passes the trail gets colder."

"You mean there's a chance we won't catch up with her?"

"More than a chance. A probability."

Coleman's cell phone rang, and he answered. A minute later, he rang off.

"The apartment she rented came furnished and was in Carol Lambert's name. And it was wiped clean. Not a print anywhere. But they think they got a couple of hair samples."

"Security cameras?"

"The staff is going over Blackwell's videos now. But routine dictates that they erase tapes after a twenty-four-hour period so all we'll have is the footage from yesterday."

Ryder looked at his watch. The woman had left his place just before six. Nine hours ago. Which meant she could be pretty much anywhere in the world by now. Probably collecting the cash she'd stolen from his company.

"I want to see the footage as soon as it comes in."

"I don't expect to get much," Coleman said. "She always walked as if staring at something on her shoe. I thought it was because she was self-conscious, but now we know the real reason."

Ryder also knew the real reason she'd originally rebuffed his advances yesterday after finding out he'd been the one she'd raced with. No doubt number one in the con artist's handbook was "Fly under the radar."

"Ryder?"

He blinked at Coleman.

“Are you okay?”

No. He was far from okay. Because he was all too aware that if he hadn’t taken the woman back to his place last night, he wouldn’t be obsessed with the situation right now. He’d have left everything in Coleman’s capable hands and gone on with his day full of meetings overseeing expansion plans, financial realignments and mergers. While the amount of money wasn’t anything to sneeze at by any means, it wasn’t enough to warrant the type of attention he was giving to it. The company lost that amount in a day if truck drivers went on strike in the Midwest.

Despite all that, he’d cancelled everything, mentally incapable of doing anything but concentrating on this one thing. This was personal.

“I want to talk to Johnstone,” he said, naming the head of security.

“I can do that. Don’t you have a meeting regarding Stanton?”

Ryder got up from his chair and put his suit jacket on. “I cancelled it.”

“But we’re in the final stages of closing the deal. Everything’s set to go into motion the instant the takeover papers are signed. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

No, it was a decidedly bad idea. The not-altogether-friendly leveraged buyout of his second-largest competitor would give him a marketing edge in the nation’s distribution system, one of the many areas in which Blackwell & Blackwell owned businesses. But Ryder couldn’t help himself. He was going to find this woman who’d impersonated Carol Lambert, the woman in the rented Audi, and he was going to find her now.

BY THE END of the week, Ryder had been forced to accept that his finding her wasn’t going to be easily checked off his agenda.

It was a Sunday and along with Blackwell & Blackwell’s own security team, he was paying three detective firms double their going rate to find her.

Only it was beginning to look like no amount of money was going to be able to uncover the true identity of the woman who’d screwed him... twice.

Coleman told him that perhaps it was time to admit defeat and move on. Besides, the company could write the loss off. There was the Stanton deal in limbo and very possibly in danger of unraveling altogether. But Ryder couldn’t seem to think of anything else.

“Are you all right, son?”

Ryder looked at his father, walking next to him along the Coney Island boardwalk. The place where he’d grown up, but now only visited when he saw his father every other Sunday.

“That’s the third time you’ve asked me,” Ryder said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his Lauren khakis.

Growing up, he’d heard countless times how much he and his father looked alike. Some of the family’s relatives had even taken to calling him Junior, though his father’s name was Alan. But time had erased those physical similarities. And while Ryder only lived across the river in Manhattan, it might as well have been across the Atlantic as far as their lifestyles went. His father would take the train into town every now and again for coffee and to go to a museum exhibit or an off-off-Broadway show, but otherwise their lives were separate. And had been since Ryder’s mother had died of breast cancer fifteen years ago.

Of course, it didn’t help that their differences extended to their own personal ideologies.

Being born a Blackwell, his father had once told him, was no different than being born under any other name, despite the historical and cultural significance it once held in New York. Ryder would always remember that conversation, held when he’d come home soaked on a rainy Tuesday in April. He was nine and he’d just learned that his ancestors had been instrumental in the building of Manhattan and that even his grandfather, his father’s father, had enjoyed great wealth, until the mid 1950s when the family had been bankrupted.

His father? His take was that it had probably happened for a good reason. While Alan Blackwell had been educated at Harvard and enjoyed a privileged upbringing, he’d adjusted amazingly well

to his new station in life. In fact, it seemed to suit him better, his mother used to say. Rather than working as the CEO of the family company and attending Broadway openings and Lincoln Center charity events, he'd taught American Lit at NYU for most of his career, and had just recently retired, speaking here and there when invited.

Otherwise he lived a quiet life in Brooklyn, visiting his favorite bakery every morning, reading the newspaper, or with his nose in whatever obscure book he'd picked up from the used bookstore on the corner.

But whereas his father had experienced life on both sides of the fence, young Ryder had spent his youth with his fingers fused to the fence links, staring longingly at the skyline across the river. Driven not only to recover his family's longstanding wealth and status, but to up the ante on both counts.

And at thirty-six he'd done all that and more.

"And that's the third time you haven't answered me." His father chuckled quietly then put his arm around his son's shoulders. "Ask the experienced, not the learned."

Ryder offered a half grin. His life had been filled with quotes from one source or another. Mostly his father had been trying to convince him that it wasn't how much he had in his pockets but the love he held in his heart that was the true measure of a good man.

Ryder had in turn spent most of his life ignoring that advice.

"Just some things going on at work," he said.

"Anything you'd like to share?"

"No, no."

"And here I thought the problem might be a woman." The senior Blackwell drew to a stop near the edge of the boardwalk and squinted out at the sparkling Atlantic. "You know, one of your mother's biggest regrets was that she never got to enjoy a grandchild."

"If I remember correctly, you were the one to say that I probably would never have children."

"That's because you have to find a good woman first. And you move too fast to catch bad women, much less good ones." He looked at him. "Up until recently I at least hoped you'd make an effort at continuing the Blackwell name if just for legacy's sake."

"I thought you didn't buy into any of that."

"I don't. But you do. Me? I'd just like to have a grandson or granddaughter who I can teach to play chess. Or at least know that my son, my only child, will finally learn what it means to know love."

"I know love. I had it with Mom. With you."

"And when I'm gone?"

Ryder also stared out at the ocean. "Are you planning on a trip I don't know about?"

"No. But it's something that's been on my mind a lot lately."

"I told you it was a bad idea when you retired—"

"I was forced out, Ryder. There's nothing more irritating than a rambling old man who can't find his notes."

"So teach somewhere here. At a Brooklyn school."

"My teaching days are over." They began walking again. "Besides, if I couldn't teach my own son, tell me what impact I'd really have on other's children."

It wasn't like his father to talk about death in such a direct way. And Ryder wasn't sure how to take it. While he'd heard other parents talk to their children about the impending visit from the Grim Reaper, even if that visit was some twenty to thirty years in the future, his father had never been like that. There were too many topics to discuss, politics to cut through.

"A wiser man, perhaps, might have figured out early on that the way to teach you was to misteach you."

"How do you mean?"

“If I had encouraged you, no insisted on, you rebuilding the family fortune, you would have rebelled and done the opposite. Had I told you having a wife and children would only saddle you down, you probably would be married fifteen years now with three kids.”

Ryder chuckled. “Reverse psychology. But you’re leaving out that I would have seen through such a ruse. Besides, you could never have done it. It goes against everything you are. Everything you taught me to be.”

“But you’re still not married.”

“Why don’t you travel, Pops? You and mom always talked about wanting to travel.”

In fact, he’d arranged a month-long tour of England, Scotland and Ireland while his mother was still well enough to travel.

“I’m too old for the hassle. Besides, that was your mom’s and my dream. Without her...well, without her it wouldn’t be the same.”

And one day, perhaps soon, Ryder would be faced with life without his father in it. And for the first time he accepted that it wouldn’t be the same, either.

5

THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY everyone around Ryder had officially admitted defeat. But Ryder refused to raise the white flag.

He stood at the windows of his office staring out from his elevated spot at the buildings of Manhattan spread out before him like a giant’s handful of mismatched dice. Somewhere out there was the woman who had set his sheets on fire, then outwitted him. And he intended to find her. Whatever it took.

He turned back to his desk and the telephone book he had opened to with the listing of detective agencies in the tri-borough area. Being in Brooklyn with his father last weekend had given him a couple of ideas by reminding him that he hadn’t always been standing at the top of the mountain. He’d gotten a raw view from the gutters looking up, as well. After a four-year stint in the marines, he’d received his degree from Columbia, then had emerged onto the social scene using his family name as his passport with which to rebuild the Blackwell empire. Within six years, he’d sat at the helm of the first company at which he’d worked. Two years after that, he’d bought the company and taken it private and had been expanding the business ever since.

And he hadn’t gotten where he was now without getting his hands dirty from time to time. And the mystery woman made him want to thrust both hands directly into the black dirt.

Ryder noted the name and address of a Brooklyn detective agency then picked up the phone. Sometimes it took a fellow gutter rat to find another one in the maze that was the criminal underworld. He picked up the phone and placed the call.

THE BROOKLYN detective agency was little more than a small storefront that could have easily have been a travel agency or a take-out restaurant, not unlike the other businesses around it. The furniture was old, but the place was clean. And P.I. Kylie Capshaw had the tough exterior of someone who’d spent more than a few years foraging around in the gutters, both as a result of the hard life had dealt her, as well as to succeed as a woman in her chosen profession.

“Mr. Blackwell. A pleasure.” She said, extended her hand.

“Ryder, please,” he said, returning her firm shake. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and well-worn cowboy boots he suspected were steel-toed and capable of doing a fair amount of damage should anyone cross her. And she looked like the type who wouldn’t hesitate to do that damage.

“Slumming it, huh?” she questioned, taking two mugs out of a metal desk drawer then crossing to a coffeemaker.

Ryder glanced at his Lagerfeld suit. He hadn’t thought about changing his clothes to take the late-afternoon meeting. “In a manner of speaking.”

“So tell me,” she said, sitting down behind the old metal desk covered with paperwork. She took a bottle of Bailey’s from a different drawer then poured the Irish cream into the coffee and

handed him a cup. Ryder took it then watched as she sipped hers. “How do you think I’ll be able to help you where others haven’t been able to? Because I get the feeling that you’re not here for a personal matter you don’t want others to know about. Am I right?”

“Spot on.”

“Who’ve you been to?”

He told her.

“Ah. The Big Three.” She raised her brows. “And they haven’t been able to get what you want?”

“No. While this is a white-collar crime, a blue-collar criminal committed it.”

“And your reasoning is that it takes a blue-collar gal to find a blue-collar criminal.”

Her words weren’t so much as a question as they were a statement. “Yes,” Ryder answered simply.

Kylie grinned. “Then it looks like you’ve come to the right place...”

BETWEEN Seline’s legs vibrated one of the most powerful machines built by man, and something she’d been craving ever since sneaking out of Ryder Blackwell’s bed the week before. The custom black Ducati 999R Xerox motorcycle with a Testastretta 143-hp engine gave her a sense of freedom not even a car could afford her. And as she ran it down the empty roads in rural southwest Wisconsin, the roar drowning out all other sounds, the air whipping around her black leather-clad body, she felt like a hellcat demon on a mission.

That is, if she ignored that there was no real mission, to rid the brand of Ryder’s touch from her skin.

It had been nine days since she’d pulled one of the biggest cons of her career. Yet a sense of a job incomplete tailed her like a state trooper with his siren blaring. Returning home usually calmed her, allowed her distance from her last job in order to concentrate on what needed to be done to ensure her security and to focus on the next con. But not this time. This time, her mind ceaselessly returned to Blackwell & Blackwell. Or more specifically to the man who sat at the helm.

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