

THE BOSS AND HIS COWGIRL

Silver James



Desire[™]

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The Boss And His Cowgirl

Аннотация

When the billionaire boss beckons... Ever since she left behind her cowgirl roots to work for him, Georgie Dreyfus has had a crush on her boss, U.S. Senator Clay Barron. So the sexy speechwriter is speechless when Clay comes to her rescue on the campaign trail...and they discover a mutual chemistry that will no longer be denied. But when their relationship faces one of the biggest veto threats of all, Georgie goes home to Oklahoma to regroup. Now the billionaire Barron must choose: continue his quest to win the White House or win back the woman who's laid claim to his heart...

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“We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Maybe.” He buried his nose behind her ear and nibbled the soft skin. “Want me to stop?”

He continued to kiss her, nuzzling along her jaw to her mouth. Full lips. Soft. Sweet. Just like the woman. He deepened the kiss, waiting for her to open for him.

“Georgie?” He murmured her name against her lips.

She leaned back and stared at him, looking helpless and unsure.

“Sweet pea? What is it?”

“I’ve wanted this ... you ... I’ve dreamed about it ... but ...”

“Shh, darlin’. This is good. We’re good.” And it shocked him to realize he spoke the truth. This wasn’t a simple seduction. He *liked* Georgie. As a person. And was just now discovering how truly sexy she was. Coming into a relationship from this direction was a revelation. “We’re more than good, Georgie.”

He recognized her surrender in the way her eyes softened and went unfocused, in the way her arms crept around his neck, in the way her lips sought his and her body pressed against him. “Will you stay with me tonight, Georgie? In my bed?”

* * *

The Boss and His Cowgirl is part of the Red Dirt Royalty series: These Oklahoma millionaires work hard and play harder

The Boss and His Cowgirl

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SILVER JAMES likes walks on the wild side and coffee. Okay. She **LOVES** coffee. A cowgirl at heart, she's been an army officer's wife and mum, and worked in the legal field, fire service and law enforcement. Now retired from the real world, she lives in Oklahoma, spending her days writing with the assistance of two Newfoundlands, the cat who rules them all and the characters living in her imagination.

To Jenny, Connie, Mac and Warriors in Pink everywhere.

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Clayton Barron owned the room—held the emotions, the very hearts and minds of his audience in the palm of his hand. He controlled them with the power of his voice and the words he uttered with such complete conviction. He was in charge, just

the way he preferred it. He'd been born, bred and raised to be a US senator—and more. Now into his second term, he stood at the podium of the convention of the Western States Landowners Association in Phoenix, Arizona, and the words rolled off his tongue, his voice infused with sincerity.

Georgeanne Dreyfus, his communications director, had written and fine-tuned the speech. The phrases she'd crafted pushed all the right buttons for this audience. Just as they'd practiced at the hotel last night, he paused for a beat then raised his chin and squared his shoulders.

“I understand your frustration. My great-great-grandfather settled the Crown B Ranch long before Oklahoma achieved statehood. He worked that ranch with his own hands. He survived storms, fires, droughts and floods all so he could leave the land—our birthright—to his children and their children.” He inhaled and shifted his expression to reflect a hint of arrogance. “It's time we acknowledge our family legacies. We live on the land. Work it every single day of our lives, from sunrise to dark. It's time we tell the government to back off. It's time they stop tying our hands with their arbitrary rules and regulations. It's time we take back what is ours.”

The room erupted into cheers, whistles and loud applause. He basked in the crowd's admiration. After a long standing ovation, the president of the association crossed the stage to shake his hand and thank him. He glanced toward the back of the room. His chief of staff offered a discreet thumbs-up. The

head of Clay's personal security team stood nearby, his restless gaze scanning the room. Time to move through the crowd, glad-handing his way to the exit. He had an hour to make it from downtown Phoenix out to Scottsdale for his next engagement, a fund-raising dinner with some of the party's biggest donors.

His gaze strayed to the indistinct figure standing just off stage. Georgie. He didn't have to see her to picture how she looked—straight-cut bangs, her hair scraped back from her face and twisted up in some impossible way, black eyeglass frames dominating her features. He'd overheard more than one reporter comment on her sexy librarian vibe. She'd been there in the backstage shadows the whole time, listening, and more than likely silently mouthing each word as he spoke it. He quirked the corner of his mouth and winked at her. Georgie had been a steady part of his team almost from the beginning. He relied on her to put heart into his words, to spin the press just right. She worked hard for him and he appreciated her efforts. He was lucky to have her at his side.

He cut his eyes toward the back of the auditorium and tilted his head—Georgie's signal to head out. As soon as he descended the steps from the stage, Boone Tate, his chief of staff and cousin, appeared next to him. Clay was a firm believer in keeping it all in the family.

Boone leaned close to whisper in his ear. "Hunt says there's a group of protesters out front. Local cops are handling them but we shouldn't linger too long."

Working a room like this came naturally to Clay. A quick grip of hands, a few brief words, never stopping, always moving toward his goal—the exit. They reached the convention center’s lobby a few short minutes later. Outside, an exuberant crowd milled about, waiting for Clay’s appearance. A second, more sinister group pushed against a line of local law enforcement officers.

Hunter Tate, chief of security and Boone’s older brother, arrived and steered Clay away from the wide doors. “Taking the back way out. The SUVs and local police backup will meet us at the loading dock.” Flanked by the security team and led by the Phoenix Convention Center’s security director, they hurried down a side hallway toward the rear of the huge building.

The group hadn’t gone twenty feet when the lights went out and sparks lit up the dark. Choking smoke filled the air. The security team switched on flashlights. Hunter grabbed Clay’s elbow, urging him forward.

“Wait.” Clay stopped dead. “Where’s Georgie?”

“On it.” One of the plainclothes security guys peeled off and jogged back the way they’d come, his light bouncing in the swirling fog. He called back over his shoulder, “I’ll bring her.”

A few minutes later they emerged through a metal fire door. A black SUV waited in the alley between buildings. Sharp reports—too close to the sound of gunfire to be ignored—erupted nearby. The security team surrounded Clay and Boone, ran for the vehicle and pushed them into the backseat.

“No!” Clay resisted. “Georgie. We’re not leaving without her.” More gunshots—or firecrackers; he wasn’t sure at this point—went off and then a woman’s high-pitched scream scraped his nerves.

“Aw, crap.” Hunter surged through the scrum of security surrounding the car, and Clay leaned around Boone to see.

Georgie lay crumpled at the bottom of the steel loading-dock steps. Police scrambled around the corner chasing a group of people wearing Guy Fawkes masks as they ran away. When Hunter grabbed Georgie, she screamed again but he hauled her to her feet and hustled her to the car. Her face was smudged with residue from the oily smoke, and her glasses looked as if they’d been sprayed with black paint. The poor girl couldn’t see a thing.

Boone got out of the car but had to shout to be heard over the commotion. “Georgie, it’s okay. We’ve got you.” She visibly relaxed at the sound of his voice and let Hunter bundle her into the backseat. Boone dove in behind her as Hunter jumped into the front seat and told the driver to take off.

The SUV accelerated through the alley and they passed the cops, who had taken the protesters to the ground and were handcuffing them. Sirens wailed a shrieking duet with squealing tires as the SUV careened onto the street. Two police cars and a second SUV with Barron Security forces inside formed the motorcade as they raced away.

Georgie was wedged into the middle of the backseat between Boone and Clay, shivering uncontrollably and gulping air. Her

hand flailed, found Clay's and latched on. Clay was too furious to speak. Georgie was his employee and she'd been terrorized by those sons of bitches. Her nails bit into his skin but he ignored the sharp prick. Boone removed her glasses and passed them to Hunter to clean while he took out a handkerchief and gently wiped her face. She shuddered and squeezed Clay's hand harder. He squeezed back.

Hunter twisted around in the front seat and handed the glasses back. Clay took them and gently placed them on Georgie's face. She was shaking and didn't speak. With her glasses back in place, she squinted and looked around. Boone's handkerchief was now a dirty gray so Clay retrieved the one from his back pocket and dabbed at the side of her face closest to him. He gave her hand another squeeze.

"Wh-what happened?" Georgie swallowed and Clay's gaze was drawn to her slender throat.

"Sugar, it's okay." Boone leaned in from the opposite side. "You're safe now."

She inhaled and let her breath out slowly, visibly relaxing as she did so. "The lights. And smoke. I...couldn't see. Did I fall down?" She raised her right leg and stared at her shredded nylon. "The guy with the gun? Did they get him?" She rubbed her left shoulder with her right hand since Clay still held her left.

"Gun?" Hunter's voice was sharp.

"I thought..." She inhaled and rubbed at her chest as if breathing deeply hurt. Tears glistened on her lashes and she

closed her eyes. “Did I hear gunshots?”

Hunter spoke into the high-tech microphone straddling his jawline and listened before saying, “Probably firecrackers. Police didn’t find any weapons.”

Clay continued to wipe the smoke residue off her cheek. When she winced and jerked her head, he realized her face was bruised. “Someone hit you?” His voice was sharp and demanding.

She shook her head then pressed the heel of her free hand against her forehead. “No. I fell. A couple of times, I think. It was...dark. I couldn’t see anything.” Squeezing her eyes shut, she gulped in air.

Clay was afraid she’d hyperventilate. “You’re okay, Georgie. Where else are you hurt?”

Georgie glanced down. Her skirt and jacket were both torn. There were runs in her hose and both knees were scraped and bleeding. Another deep breath had her clutching her side. “Ow.”

“What is it?” Clay didn’t recognize his own voice and regretted sounding so gruff that Georgie jerked away from him. He hadn’t released the hand he held so she didn’t get far.

“I’m sorry.” She turned worried eyes to him then glanced away. “This is my fault. I didn’t mean to make you angry.”

He made an effort to soften his voice. “This isn’t your fault and I’m not angry with you. I’m angry at the protesters. I’m angry because this happened to you, Georgie. Understood?” He smoothed his thumb in small circles against the back of her hand.

“We’re headed to the hotel so you can get cleaned up. Don’t...just don’t worry.”

Her bottom lip quivered and she closed her eyes again. Clay cut his eyes to Hunter. The other man’s expression was remote but for the regret and anger in his eyes.

“My fault. It won’t happen again, Senator.”

Clay nodded. Working so closely with family could blur the lines but Hunter knew his team had screwed up. He acknowledged it by using Clay’s title. From the looks of things as they’d left the alley, the local authorities had the perpetrators in custody. Hunt would make sure the protesters were prosecuted.

As the SUV careened around a corner, Georgie slammed her head back against the seat and groaned. Before Clay could react, Boone had her leaning forward and was gently probing the back of her head.

“Sugar, that’s a big lump you’ve got back there.”

“Oh...uh... I think I hit a metal cabinet or something. The first time I fell. As I stood up. Maybe.” She settled carefully against the back of the seat.

Boone carried on a quiet conversation over his cell phone, making arrangements for their party to arrive late at the Scottsdale fund-raiser. Without discussing it, Clay decided to leave Georgie at the hotel, along with one of the security team members. The poor girl was obviously upset, not that he blamed her. She was bruised, bloody and probably had injuries she didn’t even realize she had.

Driving the wrong way, the convoy pulled into the guest exit of the Barron's Desert Crown Resort in Scottsdale. The security team wanted Clay, who was sitting behind the driver, to exit closest to the hotel's entry. The squad disembarked from their vehicle and formed a phalanx to move Clay through the lobby and onto the elevator. When his door opened, Clay stepped out and pulled Georgie out after him, refusing to relinquish her hand. He felt connected to her and protective.

A barrage of camera flashes flared and Georgie stumbled. Without thinking, Clay swept her into his arms in a princess carry. Her arms circled his neck and she buried her face against his shoulder, hiding from the cameras and shouted questions. His anger surged again but cooler heads prevailed as Boone and Hunter guided him through the lobby and onto a waiting elevator, ignoring the reporters yelling for a statement.

The express ride took them straight to the penthouse level where Clay occupied the Sonoma Suite, the hotel's equivalent of presidential lodging. He met Boone's surprised expression with quiet directions. "Go to her room and get her bags. She'll stay up here in the empty guest room."

Comprised of a living room, formal dining room, study, kitchen facilities and four bedrooms with attached baths, there was room for Clay, Boone, Hunter and now Georgie. He didn't want her alone in some random hotel room, even though every room in his family's resort was five-star. He wanted her safe and he wasn't convinced she would be out of his sight—irrational

as that sounded. Without breaking stride, Clay continued into the master bedroom and straight to the massive bath. He set her on the marble vanity top without regard to the gray smudges smeared across his white Western-cut shirt. He almost smiled at the impression his turquoise bolo tie had left on Georgie's cheek. Keeping a hand on her shoulder to hold her steady, he grabbed a washcloth and wet it, squeezing out the excess water with one hand.

She remained bug-eyed, her pupils dilated, and he could almost feel her shock. Her hair, normally in a neat bun at the back of her head, was tousled and framing her pale face—and was far longer than he'd realized. With gentleness he didn't know he possessed, Clay removed her glasses and set them in the sink to be washed. He wiped her face first, rinsing the cloth before moving to her skinned knees. Her hands, clenched into tight balls on her lap, slowly relaxed.

He'd never been this...intimate with her before. They worked closely together but touching her like this? She was...Georgie. Always there when he needed a press release, a statement or a sounding board. She was efficient. Professional. And he was surprised at the curves he'd discovered when he picked her up. He realized, belatedly, that there was a very feminine woman lurking beneath her rather dowdy exterior.

Then he remembered why she was sitting on the counter in his bathroom. Anger flashed through him as hot as a grease fire. "Dammit, Georgie. This shouldn't have happened. Especially not

to you.”

She blinked, squinted, did her best to focus her eyes on his face. “Yeah, well.” She lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“Boone’s gone to your room to get your things. Stay in here and get cleaned up. Then I want you to move into the other guest room.” He tilted his head toward the door. “There’s a robe on the back of the door. Okay?”

She fumbled for her glasses. He snatched them first, washed and dried them before handing them to her. Once they were back on her face, she looked more like herself, and her green eyes lost some of that shell-shocked glaze. Her nose wrinkled as she sniffed her shoulder. “Yeah, I definitely want out of these clothes. They stink like smoke.”

Clay backed away. “I’ll get out of here so you have some privacy.”

She nodded but didn’t speak so he gave her arm a little pat and steadied her as she slipped off the counter to stand on the marble floor. Once she had her balance, he backed out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind him. He almost ran over Hunter, who’d been hovering just outside.

“Dammit, Hunt. How did this happen? How did the protesters get inside?” Clay was as angry at himself as he was his security chief. Security should have watched out for her. Hell, he should have watched out for her. She was, ultimately, his responsibility.

Hunt made a noise that resembled a growl. “A group came through a secondary entrance in the basement and got to the

main control board. Building security thinks it might have been an inside job. They're investigating.”

Lightning flashed beyond the sheer curtains covering the bedroom window, followed shortly by thunder. Frowning, Hunt pulled out his cell phone, swiped the screen then punched an app icon. “I didn't know we had weather moving in tonight.” He checked the forecast and radar then shrugged. “Nothing but boomers and some rain. Now, about Georgie. It won't happen again, Clay. I promise. I'll put a man on her personally.”

Clay tunneled his fingers through his hair. “As soon as she's —” A massive boom rattled the window glass and seconds later, all the lights in the suite went out. A scream from inside the bathroom had both men scrambling—Hunt for light, Clay for the door handle.

Jerking the door open, Clay found Georgie kneeling on the floor, her head down, shoulders hunched. Was she gagging? Jeez, but he hated that sound. Had ever since college and drunken frat parties. He kicked the door shut in Hunter's face and bent down. Using the flashlight app on his cell, he checked her over. Clay lifted her long brown hair back from her face, though she tried to turn away. Georgie's throat worked as she swallowed hard, coughing with the effort.

To combat his very visceral reaction to what was happening, Clay recited the Gettysburg Address. Then the Preamble to the US Constitution. He figured he'd have to start on the Declaration of Independence next but Georgie finally inhaled and turned an

apologetic gaze on him. He stood to retrieve another washcloth.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, not looking at him as he crouched beside her.

He wondered if her heightened color was a result of exertion or embarrassment. “It’s okay—” He bit off the next word, an endearment that slipped too easily into his head. To cover, he brushed her hair back over her shoulders. Pet names didn’t come as easy to him as they did Boone. The fact that one had formed on his tongue should have concerned him, but he couldn’t work up the energy to worry about it at the moment. He handed her the washcloth and she wiped her mouth and face but still wouldn’t look at him. It was then he realized she’d stripped down to a bra and panties—red ones. He refused to process that visual, focusing instead on the situation. “What happened? You seemed okay when I walked out.”

Georgie swallowed a dry heave and wrapped her arms around her chest. “I...panicked. The dark. And the storm. I’m a tad...claustrophobic. Or something.”

Clay swallowed the insane urge to laugh as his adrenaline rush faded. He bit the insides of his cheeks and when that didn’t help, he bit his tongue in an aborted effort to stop the sputtering laugh that finally escaped. He immediately apologized. “It’s not funny. I know. I’m sorry.”

A choking sound spurted from her. She’d hidden her face in her hands so he snagged the robe from the back of the door and draped it across her shoulders and back. She slipped her arms

into the sleeves and twisted her body so she could see him. Clay was surprised to see her biting her lips as if she, too, was trying to hold back her laughter. Then the robe gapped and he glimpsed the bruise on her ribs. He curled his hands into fists to keep from ripping the robe off to examine her. Those bastards had marked her with their idiotic stunt. That quelled his urge to laugh.

“You’re bruised, Georgie. And you have that bump on your head. I’d like a doctor to look at you, okay?”

Her forehead furrowed in confusion before she glanced down and saw what he was talking about. “Oh. I am. Huh.” Her gaze caught on his. “I was too busy being scared witless to notice, and it was dark so I couldn’t see...”

She rubbed absently at her pale skin, and Clay reminded himself Georgie was in his employ and traumatized. He was not as big a jerk as his father or brothers when it came to women. He refused to be, but damn if he wasn’t suddenly aware that Georgie had been hiding some very interesting attributes behind her boxy suits and thick glasses—said attributes all but staring him in the face, despite the modest cut of that red lingerie and the robe.

“I’ll have the house doctor check you once the electricity—” The lights flickered, steadied and remained on. “Speaking of. Ready to get into the shower now?”

Clay stood and extended his hand to help her up. Just as she clasped his fingers, another clap of thunder shook the building and the lights extinguished. He felt her tremble and hunkered down beside her once more. “It’s okay, Georgie.”

He swiped his phone and when the screen lit up, he tapped the flashlight app once more. “See? We have light.”

Georgie was panting again and a thin sheen of perspiration covered her face. “I’m sorry. This is stupid. I know it’s stupid and irrational.”

“Fear is—” The light on his phone dimmed and he glanced at the battery indicator. He flicked off the flashlight app, but the home-screen light cast a soft glow over Georgie’s face. “Sorry. I’m down to the dregs of battery life. We can go outside, into the bedroom.”

“No. There might be monsters under the bed.”

Clay studied her face in the ghostly glow of his cell. A hint of a smile tweaked her lips. Good. This was the Georgie he knew and...liked. Yes, definitely liked. He liked Georgie. She was his employee. He was only keeping her company in his bathroom because she’d had a traumatic day.

“I promise to slay the monsters.”

“Or legislate them out of existence?”

“I can do that. I’ll introduce a bill in the Senate. And then I’ll take you dancing in the dark.”

“Isn’t that a song?”

“Springsteen.”

She blinked at him, her eyes owlish behind the lenses of her glasses. “You’re a fan of the Boss?”

“Hey, just because I grew up on Waylon, Willie and the boys, doesn’t mean I don’t have refined tastes in music.”

That elicited a giggle. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Depends. Is it working?”

“Sort of.”

“Then yes.” He eased down to the floor, stretching his legs out. “I’m going to take a shot in the dark here—”

“Peter Sellers!”

“I’m sorry. You didn’t phrase that in the form of question.” He winked at her.

“Oh, getting technical, are we? Fine. I’ll take Dark for three hundred, Alex.”

“Hmm. Okay.” The light from his phone blinked out. Clay didn’t like Georgie’s quick inhalation. He tapped the phone, thinking it had just gone into sleep mode. Nothing happened. “Sorry, Georgie. I think the battery died.”

“O-okay. Um...can we keep playing?”

“Sure. Dark for three hundred, right?”

“Yes.”

“Ha! Got one. Michelle Pfeiffer plays the family matriarch in this—”

“What is Dark Shadows?”

Georgie laughed as he huffed in pretended frustration. “How did you know that?”

“Clay, your crush on Michelle Pfeiffer is not exactly a secret around the office.”

“It isn’t?” He did his best to sound both shocked and innocent, but damn if he didn’t like the sound of his name coming from

between her lips. He couldn't remember if she'd ever called him by his first name—at least not up close and personal like this.

“I'll take Dark for a thousand, Alex.”

He racked his brain for an answer and when it came to him, he grinned. “Come to the dark side. We have cookies.”

A sound that was a cross between a giggle and snort erupted from Georgie. “How do you even know that?”

The next thing Clay knew, Georgie was laughing—a deep belly laugh that almost lit up the dark with its happy sound. And just like that, the lights blazed, chasing the shadows away. As she dissolved into more laughter, relieved this time, he joined her. This was a side of Georgie he appreciated—her irreverent sense of humor. Working, she was reserved, thoughtful, erudite. She had a way of boiling down an issue into sound bites. She was knowledgeable and intelligent and he thought of her as his personal... His thoughts trailed off as he stared into her eyes—eyes a shade of green he was currently trying, and failing, to describe.

With a start, he realized Georgie was no longer laughing. She'd devolved into hiccuping sobs. He hated tears. The women his father married too often resorted to them, but Georgie's were real and earned. He gathered her close, stroking his palm down her back in long caresses.

“You're okay, Georgie. You're safe.”

She nodded, fighting for control. “I know. I'm...” She sniffed, looked around for a tissue, then gave up and wiped her nose on

the sleeve of her robe. “Sorry, boss. I’m okay. Just...nerves. I hate the dark. Hate small spaces, especially in the dark.”

“Want to tell me?”

She shook her head but words tumbled out. “I was a kid. Got trapped in our old storm cellar. In the dark. Took my folks a couple of hours to find me.”

He tightened his arm around her and fought the urge to kiss the top of her head. “Yeah, that would not be fun.”

Georgie snuffled again so Clay reached for the roll of toilet paper and ripped off a strip. She took it and tried to discreetly wipe, then blow, her nose. Once she appeared composed, he disengaged and stood. “Why don’t you stay in tonight, Georgie? You deserve a night off.” When she nodded, he opened the door and edged toward it. “I’ll get out so you can shower.”

She nodded so he helped her up, made sure she was steady and once again retreated. He listened at the door until he heard the shower and then met Boone and Hunt in the living area of the suite. He gave his orders, grabbed clean clothes from his room and ducked into Boone’s room to clean up.

Georgie was still in his bathroom when he was ready to leave for the donor dinner. Part of him wanted to stay, but the practical part, the politician he’d been born, bred and raised to be, marched out of the suite led by his chief of security and trailed by his chief of staff. Georgie would be fine. She had to be. He didn’t stop to contemplate why that mattered so much.

Georgie waited in the master bath huddled in her borrowed robe until all sounds diminished outside. She didn't know what to do about her ruined clothes. Wrinkling her nose didn't help dissipate the smell of smoke. She blamed her reaction on the Phobia Twins—Nycto and Claustro. When the lights had gone out in the already shadowy backstage area, she'd panicked. Like an idiot.

When the security guard found her, she'd screamed like the blonde cheerleader in a teen horror movie. She'd lost count of the times she'd fallen and scraped herself up before he arrived. Then there was that whole thing on the loading dock, in the SUV and at the hotel entrance when— She cut that thought off.

She wanted to bang her head on the nearest hard surface. Her nerves and emotions were caused by fear. Not Clay Barron holding her hand. Or carrying her. Or...nope. Clothes. She had to deal with her clothes because they reeked of smoke and stink bombs.

Checking the trash can, she found an extra folded plastic sack. She mashed the clothes into a ball and stuffed them into the bag, spinning it and tying it off. She shoved the whole thing into the trash. Georgie briefly considered digging out her bottle of spray cologne and using it to drown the odor still lingering. Considering this was Clay's bathroom, that probably wasn't a good idea. Then she thought about using his cologne—the signature scent of almond, cedar, bergamot and lemon that never failed to weaken her knees. Nope. That would not be a smart move, either.

She slipped out of the bathroom, pausing at the master bedroom door to listen. A sports program droned on the big screen TV in the living area and she saw shoulders and a head silhouetted over the back of the couch. Her embarrassment sent her scurrying, but she stopped when the guy spoke.

“You all right, Miss Dreyfus?”

“Y-yes.” She didn’t recognize the voice and the man didn’t turn around, for which she was grateful.

“The senator and his party went to the fund-raiser. Their return ETA is midnight. Mr. Tate moved your things into the guest room next to his on the far side of the suite.” He lifted his hand and gestured before continuing. “If you’re hungry, I’ll order room service. If there’s anything else you need, just let me know. I’m Glen.”

She clutched the lapels of her robe closer to her chest. Food was the last thing she wanted but she desperately wanted a Diet Coke. “Hi, Glen. Is there... I saw a kitchen. A Diet Coke, maybe?”

“I’ll have one sent up, miss.”

“Thanks. I’ll just be in my...room.”

She dashed across the open space and ducked into the bedroom the guard had pointed out. A lamp glowed next to the bed, on which the linens had been turned down. Her suitcase occupied a low bench. Checking the closet, she found her hang-up bag with her clothing inside. The case holding her personal care items had been tucked into the adjoining bath. While not

nearly as opulent as the one in the master suite, it was far fancier than the bath in her previous room and was Architectural Digest-worthy compared to the one in her apartment back in DC. The room itself, even though it was probably the smallest bedroom in the suite, was magnificent. She needed to focus on something normal—as if brocade coverlets, silken accent rugs and needlepoint chair upholstery was normal. A hysterical giggle erupted from the back of her throat before she could stop it.

Digging through her suitcase, Georgie found her comfort jammies—worn sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt that said “Ways to win my heart...1. Buy me coffee 2. Make me coffee 3. Be coffee.” Not that she was a caffeine addict. Much. She wondered if there was a coffeemaker in the kitchen. If she couldn’t sleep—and she suspected it would be hard—she’d go look. Coffee would be a godsend.

A light tap on the bedroom door had her scrambling back into the robe. “Yes?”

“I’ve got your Coke, and the hotel doctor is here to see you.”

“Doctor?” She’d forgotten, in the midst of her mortification, that Clay had offered to send a doctor. Georgie opened the door a crack and a kindly face with wild black eyebrows peered at her over Glen’s shoulder. “Miss Dreyfus, I’m Dr. Bruce. The senator asked me to look in on you.”

“Um...sure. Come in.” Glen handed her a bottle of Diet Coke so cold it still had little bits of ice clinging to it.

“I’ll be right out here, ma’am.”

Ma'am? Ouch. She was only thirty. She pushed her glasses to the bridge of her nose and nodded, suddenly reminded of her dowdy looks. Stepping back, she opened the door wide enough for the doctor to enter.

He waved her toward the edge of the bed. "Do you mind sitting here, Ms. Dreyfus? I fear I'll need to do some prodding and poking. I hear you've had quite a day."

The snort escaped before she could stop it. "You could say that."

"Are you wearing anything under the T-shirt? Perhaps a tank or bra?"

Georgie blushed. "Oh, yeah. That would probably keep both of us from being embarrassed. Just a sec." She grabbed a spaghetti-strapped tank and dashed into the bathroom. She whipped off her sweatshirt and pulled the tank on before returning and settling on the bed once again.

She had to lift the tank so he could see her torso. Dr. Bruce tsked at the bruises staining the ribs on her right side and her cheek. He hummed at the knot on the back of her head. "You've got quite a collection of injuries, young lady. Are you in discomfort?"

"Only when I laugh?" She wagged her brows and the man smiled.

"Good to have a sense of humor, Ms. Dreyfus." He made sure her eyes were equal and reactive then checked her blood pressure, temperature and other vital signs before continuing. "You were

lucky. You'll be sore for a few days, but the bruises will fade in a week or so." He coiled his stethoscope and dropped it into his bag before digging around in a side pocket. He pulled out a white envelope and wrote on it before retrieving a bottle of pills. He emptied six into the envelope and handed it to her. "I don't see signs of a concussion so I'm prescribing a light sleep aid. I suggest you take two tonight and then use the others as needed. Take one at bedtime over the next few nights. I'll also leave you some cold packs to help with the bruising and the bump. Once you get back to Washington, I want you to see your regular physician if you continue having trouble. Any questions?"

"No, sir. I'm good."

He patted her on the shoulder. "Get some rest, Ms. Dreyfus. That's the best thing for you."

The doctor opened the door and Glen almost fell through. Her guard was taking his duties seriously. He ushered Dr. Bruce out, shutting the door behind him. Georgie looked at the envelope and debated the pros and cons. She hated taking medicine but suspected the doctor was right. She'd replay the day's events—especially Clay's actions—on an endless loop guaranteed to keep her tossing and turning all night. Clay. She had to stop thinking of him by his first name. The senator. Her boss. The unattainable symbol of every feminine fantasy she'd had since the day she'd first walked into his campaign headquarters ten years before.

"Argh!" If her head wasn't already pounding, she might beat it against the wall. "Georgeanne Ruth Dreyfus, you are a complete

and utter idiot.” In self-defense, she shook two pills into her palm, twisted the top off the Diet Coke and took her medicine. Settling in bed, she snuggled into a world-class pillow.

* * *

The song “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” invaded her dream. Over and over. Georgie fumbled for her cell phone but it wasn’t on the bedside table. The song stopped and she snuggled back under the covers, her brain as foggy as San Francisco Bay. She’d barely closed her eyes when the song played again. This time she threw off the covers and went hunting. She found the blasted phone in the side pocket of her messenger bag—the bag with the strap that broke yesterday when she tumbled off the loading dock, but was now perfect.

The hair prickled on the back of her neck. She didn’t remember bringing it from the car last night and there was no way it could have been repaired. The phone stopped ringing, again, and she noticed the price tag still attached to the intact shoulder strap. This wasn’t her bag, even though it was full of her stuff. Hers was a cheap knockoff. This one was the real deal, according to the amount listed on the tag.

Before her brain could cycle through the implications, the phone sang a third time. She answered with a snarled, “What!”

“OMG, Georgie! Are you okay? I’ve been so worried and then you didn’t answer and where are you and are you all right, what happened—” Jennifer Antonelli, her best friend, paused to inhale.

“Slow down, Jen. How did you know something happened?”

“How did I know?” Jen’s voice rose in pitch. “How did I know? Georgeanne, you’re all over the morning news!”

Her stomach dropped. She found the remote control for the television and thumbed it to life. Scrolling through, she found an all-news channel. And sank to the edge of the bed, her legs no longer steady. “Oh, no. The cameras. I’m screwed.”

“Georgie! What the heck happened yesterday? And were you really rescued by the senator?”

She had to put her head between her knees and breathe to keep from hyperventilating and passing out. “Dang, dang, dang,” was all she could manage.

Jennifer had no such handicap. “What did it feel like? Is he as strong as he looks? I mean, gracious! He scooped you up and carried you away like...like...I don’t know who! Holy cannoli, girl. Clay Barron was like Kevin Costner in that movie where he rescued Whitney Houston. Georgie? Georgie, are you listening to me?”

“Shush, Jen. I’m trying to hear the commentary on TV.”

Voices droned in the background as footage played of the Tate brothers hustling her—clothes torn, knees bloody—into the rear seat of the senator’s SUV. Clay looked shocked and angry as he ducked back inside to make room for her. The scene changed to their arrival at the hotel. The guards jogged up and opened the back door. Clay emerged holding her hand. Holding her hand? Georgie couldn’t breathe for a minute and then, moments later

when she stumbled and he swept her into his arms, she choked.

“Oh, God.” Panting, she resumed her head-between-knees position.

“Georgie? Georgeanne! Speak to me. Are you okay?”

“No. I need to die. Like right now. No. I would have been better off dying last night. Oh, Mother Goose, Jen. I am so screwed.”

“You keep saying that! What happened? Have you been holding out on me?”

“No. Oh, dang it, dang it, dang it.” Georgie needed coffee. Stat. There was still liquid left in her Diet Coke bottle. She gulped it down and glanced at the clock. Five-fifteen. Arizona didn’t do Daylight Savings Time so it was just after 7:00 a.m. in Washington. She rubbed her face and eyes. This was bad. Really bad. How many times had she dreamed of a romantic interlude with the senator? Way too often, but never played out in front of cameras. And reporters. On the national news.

Memories crowded in and she swayed. “He saw me, Jen,” she whispered into the phone.

“Saw you? What do you mean?”

“In my bra and panties. I...I panicked. He... I think he held me in his lap.” In full panic mode, she fled her bedroom, praying there would be a coffeemaker in the kitchen. And stationery. So she could write out her resignation letter. How in the world was she going to face Clay this morning? Sprinting through the living area, she barely noticed the bodyguard jumping to his feet. She

sort of waved him back to his chair with a vague motion of her hand.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” she murmured when she spotted a Keurig machine and a display of K-Cups. “Coffee, Jen. Coffee first.”

“You okay, Miss Dreyfus?” The guard watched her warily from just beyond the granite bar separating the kitchen from the dining area.

“Yeah. Yes. Coffee. I just need coffee. Sorry to have disturbed you. Um...carry on.” She wanted to head-slap herself. Carry on? Seriously? Her foot tapped a jittery rhythm as the machine performed its magic. Once she had a fresh-brewed latte in her hands she could breathe again. Almost. She drained the cup in a few gulps and brewed another.

“Who are you talking to and I’m still waiting for an explanation, missy,” Jen hissed through her phone.

“Shhh. I have to get back to my room.”

“Back to your room? Where are you?”

“I’m in the senator’s suite.”

Ducking her head, she dashed back to her room and shut the door, ignoring the guard’s grin as she ran past him. “Okay. I can think now. Maybe.”

“How in blue blazes did the senator see you in your underwear and please tell me it was the nice stuff and not the ratty granny panties you normally wear!”

“The protesters yesterday. There were smoke bombs.

And...they cut the lights, Jen. I was backstage. I fell and banged my head. Tripped on the darn stairs and fell again.”

“Jiminy, girl! Are you okay?”

“I have some wicked bruises.” She touched the back of her head. The lump remained but wasn’t as tender. “And thank goodness, I have a hard head.”

Jen’s voice turned sly. “Did the senator kiss all your owies to make them better?”

“Jennifer Marie Antonelli, he did not!” Casting a worried glance at her closed door, Georgie lowered her voice. “It wasn’t like that. He was holding my hand because he was being nice. And then I tripped getting out of the car because all the camera flashes blinded me. My glasses were smeary and you know how blind I am so—”

“And the man picked you up like you were a fairy-tale princess and carried you off to his castle.”

“Well...sort of. They’re worried about security because of the protesters so I was moved into his suite. There’s lots of room. I mean serious room. Four bedrooms, five baths, all the amenities.”

“You’re stalling, Georgie. I don’t want a travelogue. I want the down and dirty.”

She inhaled and blew her breath out through puffed cheeks and pursed lips. In a resigned voice, Georgie recounted the events, ending with, “Then he left.”

“Wait. You played strip Jeopardy?”

“My boss saw me in my undies and you’re making up games? And what part of him holding me and...and...” She started to hyperventilate again. “OMG, Jen. I have to resign. I can’t face the man.”

“Breathe, Georgie. Does he have any idea how you feel?”

“You mean have I told him that I love him like crazy and have since the moment I met him? Oh, yeah, right. I definitely confessed that to him last night.”

“Your sarcasm is showing. That’s a good thing. It means you’ll be okay. But you can’t quit, Georgie. You have your dream job. Besides, if the man can’t look beyond your tightly-whities and see what a jewel you are, he doesn’t deserve you.”

“Awww, Jen. Loyal to a fault. But they were red.”

“I’m serious. You’re just panicky. How many times have you had to put your head between your knees this morning?”

Laughter burst from Georgie’s mouth. “Too many.”

“See? I know you. Now, grab a shower. I’d tell you to put on something sexy but you don’t own...wait! Red? You own red panties?”

“And a red bra.”

“Are they lacy?”

“Well...um...no.”

“Just as I thought. Now go put on your business suit of armor, get more coffee and do what you do best—work. Okay?”

Georgie nodded then remembered Jen couldn’t see her. “Okay. You’re right.”

“Of course I am. I’m always right. I’m your BFF. Keep me posted. I never want to find out stuff like this from the news ever again. Capisce?”

“Capisce.”

Three

Clay stared at the press briefing folder lying front and center on his desk. He did not want to open it. He’d already seen the news coverage of yesterday’s fiasco. The file would hold hard copies of clippings and photographs from print media and the internet. Georgie would have put together a digital file of clips, too, and emailed it, but she knew his preference for paper. He leaned back in his chair and swiveled so he could look out the window. A few of the more lurid headlines made him roll his eyes.

Senator Protects Aide à la The Bodyguard

Barron Rescues Damsel in Distress

Senator Barron—Hero in Disguise

All the articles led with a photograph of him sweeping Georgie into his arms to carry her. He leaned forward, tapping two fingers on the photo. Georgie must have been up before the Arizona sunrise to cull all the stories from the New York shows and national press and prepare them, though she evidently had gone back to bed. She’d been asleep when he returned from the fund-raising dinner last night. The night guard said she’d taken some prescribed sleeping pills and went right to bed. Her door wasn’t locked so Clay had peeked in first thing this morning and

she'd been curled up in a semi-fetal position under a thick pile of bedcovers. Then he'd walked into the suite's study and found his desk set up just like every other working day.

Boone rapped his knuckles against the door and sauntered in, leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb. He inclined his head toward the open file. "You've seen the headlines."

Nodding, Clay shuffled through the file, barely glancing at the various photos and clippings. "And the coverage on all the news channels. Your take?"

"You should have a nice bump in the next poll, especially in that all-important women's vote. They'll see you as heroic and dashing now. Let's face it, you're already the most eligible bachelor inside or outside the Beltway, and we all know you've got the Barron good looks." He chuckled. "Tates are more handsome, but you Barrons aren't bad."

Boone reflexively caught the pen Clay tossed at him then sobered. "In all seriousness, now you have that intangible mystique that will draw women. I'm sorry Georgie got caught in the middle, but those protesters did you a huge favor."

Clay growled under his breath. He, too, hated what had happened to Georgie. Her tears just about undid him. He couldn't deal with tears. Hadn't since— He cut off that thought, only to have it replaced by the memory of cradling Georgie in his arms—with very little between them. He'd wanted to take care of her. And maybe a little more. Doing so would have been taking advantage of a bad situation. He was not his father or his younger

brothers. He could keep his libido in check.

The curves he discovered when he'd held her had been a surprise, and seeing her in that cute, if rather prim, red lingerie left no doubts. He halted that train of thought and reminded himself that Georgie was...Georgie. She dealt with the press, wrote his speeches and corralled a large portion of his staff. Boone was his right hand and she might as well be his left. Clay kept reminding himself of that. She was his employee, even if thoughts of her made him shift in his desk chair looking for a more comfortable position. Unlike his father, he didn't dip his pen in company ink.

"Is she still asleep?" Clay needed to see her, talk to her.

"Don't think so, but she's not coming out of her room."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"No."

Was Boone fidgeting? "Spit it out, cuz."

Boone stepped fully into the study and closed the door before dropping into a side chair. He put on what Clay called his "headmaster" face before asking, "What happened last night?"

"Happened?"

"Yeah. What went on between you and Georgie while I was packing up her stuff and replacing what had been ruined?"

"That's none of your business, Boone."

"It is if it affects the operation of your office. The two of you spent a lot of time in the bathroom. Alone. With the door shut."

Leaning back in the chair, Clay studied the man he trusted

maybe even more than his own brothers. He weighed the pros and cons of disclosure and finally told Boone about their encounter in the bathroom.

“Ah...okay. Yeah. I can see why she’s avoiding us this morning, especially given the publicity. Speaking of which, what in the world possessed you to pick her up?”

That was one question Clay hadn’t asked himself. “I was right there. It just seemed...prudent.”

Boone’s face scrunched into a disbelieving scowl. “Prudent? Dude, there’s not enough preplanning and money in the world to pay for that visual so I’m not complaining, but one of the security team could have caught her.” He arched a brow. “Of course, I’m still trying to figure out why you were holding her hand in the first place.”

Why had he continued to hold her hand? Clay questioned his motivation, ignoring the heat flushing his skin—color he hoped Boone didn’t see. He’d held her hand because he wanted to, but he wasn’t about to explain that to his cousin. “It just seemed like...” Like what? Like her hand fit in his? Like he felt protective? Like she needed him? Him. Not Hunt. Not Boone. Not anyone but him. “Like the right thing to do. She was upset. She’s a valued member of my staff.”

“Oh. So you would have done the same for anyone on staff?”

Clay ignored the other man’s smirking grin. “Except you. I’d let you face-plant. What are you getting at?”

“You need to be ready for the media. Georgie needs to be

prepared, too. Just sayin’.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to her so we’re on the same page. What time are we scheduled to fly back to DC?”

Boone checked his watch. “You have a meeting there at four.” He appeared to be mentally checking the flight time. “We need to leave the hotel within the hour. I’ll notify Hunt and Georgie.”

Nodding absently, Clay continued to stare out the window. “I’ll sit with Georgie on the plane so we can talk.”

Unless he was in full campaign mode, he traveled light where personnel was concerned. There would be plenty of room to spread out in the jet for the flight back to DC. He could visit with Georgie with less chance of being overheard. Not that he planned to say anything the others couldn’t hear; he just wanted to reassure her. Yes, definitely reassure her. That was what he wanted to do.

* * *

Georgie dodged the lead SUV while Clay had his back turned and jumped into the one carrying the luggage and extra security guards. Clay—no, she reminded herself. The senator. He was her boss. She never called him by his first name; that was reserved for her fantasies. Or nightmares, as last night had turned out to be. Call her chicken but she did not want to be in a confined space with him.

On the ride to the airport, she did her best not to think about the puzzled, almost hurt look Clay—the senator—had flashed her direction when he realized she wasn’t riding with him. At the

hangar, a knot of reporters were waiting on the apron. Georgie grimaced and prepared to do battle with them. This was her job, and she was very good at it, so she needed to just suck it up and get this over with. She was out of the SUV almost before it came to a complete stop. She had her game face on by the time she reached the SUV carrying Clay. One of the security guards jogged in her wake.

“The media will want a statement, Senator. I apologize we didn’t have time to discuss preparing one.” Yeah, because she was too much of a coward to face him even though Boone said they needed to get their story straight.

“I’ll divert the reporters while you go straight to the plane. I’ll have something drafted for your approval before we reach Washington.” Georgie kept her voice and manner brusque. Professional. Just business as usual. Yeah, right. Nerves thrashed like piranha in a feeding frenzy in her stomach, but she asserted steely control.

The pack was already baying their questions as she plastered her patented I-got-this expression on her face and strolled off to wage a war of wits. She sauntered toward the reporters, held back by a line of uniformed police.

“Georgie! Georgie, hey, Georgie! What’s up with you and the senator?”

She arched a brow and stared down her nose at the reporter. Gratified when he squirmed, she rolled her eyes at him. “Seriously, Stu? Since when did you cover the gossip beat?”

“Georgie, what’s the senator’s stand on that pending eminent domain case in Utah?”

Now this was a slippery slope of a different angle. “As you know, Senator Barron’s family have been cattle ranchers for generations. The government coming in to deprive a landowner of his holdings is an issue that should play out in the courts, as this case is doing.”

“Georgie, you and the senator sure looked cozy last night at the hotel.” A female reporter surged forward, waving her microphone. “Is there something besides business between you two?”

Georgie used her oh-really? face on the reporter. “Trafficking in innuendo now, Jules?”

“The public wants to know, Georgie. Senator Barron is a very eligible bachelor. The two of you work very closely together and I have a source that says you spent the night in his suite.”

Georgie forgot to breathe for a moment as she fought to school her expression. According to the Washington press corps, she had one of the best poker faces in the business. She used it now to cover her distress.

“I’m sure all of you are aware of the security breach involving the senator’s appearance at the Western States Landowners Association event yesterday. Due to the protection detail’s concerns, all members of the senator’s immediate traveling party were relocated to the Sonoma Suite, which boasts of amenities for a large group. I’m really disappointed in you, Jules. I thought

you were a political reporter. Maybe you and Stu should go to work for Inquiring Minds.”

She pivoted to leave but one last question caught her attention.

“Yo, Georgie, so this means you aren’t dating Senator Barron?”

Glancing over her shoulder, she offered the reporter—a grizzled veteran old enough to be her father—a dazzling smile. “Why, Ed? Do you want to ask me out?”

The reporters all laughed and Georgie made a mental note to send Ed a bottle of good scotch. He’d given her the perfect out and she owed him one. She glanced at the private jet waiting on the tarmac and gulped. Clay stood at the bottom of the steps, arms folded across his chest, feet braced apart. And he looked pissed.

* * *

Clay fairly vibrated with anger. Boone cleared his throat and elbowed him. “Smile, Clay. She handled it perfectly. That’s why we pay her the big bucks.”

“I want the names of those reporters.”

“Georgie will have them.”

“I don’t want her to know I asked for them.”

“Dammit, Clay. Take a breath, bud. This is Georgie’s job and she does it damn well. Don’t muck it up. She handled the situation. Subject closed.” Boone angled his head so he could watch Georgie’s approach and Clay’s expression. “Unless... Clay, please tell me nothing happened between you two.”

“Nothing happened between us.”

“Well, all-righty, then.”

Clay glared when Boone didn't hide his smirk quite fast enough. He ignored his cousin and focused on the woman striding toward them. The bright autumn sun bounced off her glasses. She'd done some twisty thing with her hair again and he didn't want to think too hard about why he preferred it down and loose. She stopped in front of him, her expression perfectly neutral.

“Georgie.”

“Senator.”

“Sit with me.”

Clay noticed the slight pursing of her lips. And was that a hint of panic in her eyes? Interesting. He ushered Georgie forward and followed, his hand resting on the small of her back to steady her. He guided her to the group of seats at the front of the plane. Two pairs of seats faced each other over an inlaid wood table.

Clay guided her into the second set of seats so she'd be sitting with her back to the rest of the plane. Then he nudged her over so that she was trapped between the bulkhead and...him. He slipped her bag off her shoulder and tossed it into one of the facing seats.

“Sit, Georgie. And buckle in. We need to take off.”

A few moments later the Rolls Royce engines on the Gulfstream whined to full-throated life and the plane eased onto the apron headed toward the runway. Within minutes they'd lifted off and were at cruising altitude. A vanilla latte appeared in front of her while a cup of black coffee was delivered to Clay.

He waited until she took her first swallow before opening the conversation.

“You’ve been avoiding me. I want to know why.”

Georgie grimaced and swallowed hard. He shifted in his seat so he could watch her. A surge of color stained her throat and he wondered about the reason for it. No matter what she did or said, he worried this might not end well. She couldn’t stall him. He was determined to find out what was going on in her head, becoming even more curious when she curled her lips between her teeth, pursed them then chewed on them again as she evidently marshaled her thoughts.

She stared into his eyes then glanced away. “I’m a little embarrassed, Senator.”

“Embarrassed.” Why would the girl—woman—be embarrassed?

“Well, yes. Embarrassed.” Though everyone else sat at the rear of the cabin, she dropped her voice. “Last night. In the bathroom.”

“Why should you be embarrassed?”

Georgie gave him a scathing look. “Why? Oh, let’s recap the situation. I trip and almost fall on my face, only my boss snatches me in mid face-plant and carries me up to his suite. Then I go into full panic mode, while wearing only my underwear, with said boss present to witness said meltdown. I end up in a puddle of tears, and then we make national news. You’re right. Why in bloody blue blazes should I be embarrassed?”

Clay was a consummate politician. He knew how to camouflage his emotions. Georgie didn't realize her voice had risen in volume and that everyone on the plane, except maybe the pilots, now knew what had happened in his bathroom. With a supreme effort, he swallowed his laughter.

"Precisely. I see no reason for embarrassment."

"Aargh!" She threw up her hands and almost knocked over her latte. He grabbed it and held it out as a peace offering even as she muttered, "Men!" under her breath and gripped the edge of the table.

With gentle pressure, he pried her fingers loose, placed the cup between them and curled her fingers around the porcelain mug. He studied her again as she drank.

She was his communications director. She literally put words in his mouth. His thumb traced lazy circles on the table and a part of him wished it was her skin he touched.

"There's no need to be upset, especially since I...since we owe you an apology." She opened her mouth to refute, but he silenced her with a finger touching her lips as he continued. "I personally promise it won't happen again. From now on, Glen will be your shadow whenever we're at a function. He'll protect you." His gaze caught and held hers. "I'm sorry, Georgie. I'm sorry I didn't take care of you."

* * *

Georgie couldn't look away from the sincerity in his gaze. She swiveled in her seat so she could face him. His expression

stunned her. She'd seen him determined, angry, sad, happy, disgusted...but she'd never seen him like this. Her stomach lurched as her pulse sped up. Georgie couldn't name the emotion in his eyes with their thick, dark lashes the color of his ebony hair. In her imagination, where her fantasies lived, she described his hair in romance-novel terms—as glossy as a raven's wing. And his eyes—burnt umber, even if she didn't really know what burnt umber looked like. It sounded sexy and that term definitely fit Clay. Or cognac. Yes, that was the color. She knew what cognac looked like in a leaded glass tumbler and his eyes looked like that—smoky, swirling brown with glinting lights. Lost in his gaze, she simply took him in, letting him fill her up. The force of him edged into the empty places she'd ignored her whole life, the places where her hopes and dreams lived.

I'm in so much trouble now. Having a crush on the man was one thing, but she feared that after this trip, she'd fallen way over her head in love with her boss. She cleared her throat, dragging her gaze from his to break their connection. She managed to say one word.

“Okay.”

Another emotion flickered across his expression, lightening his mood. “Okay. Good. Then we're all settled. How about some breakfast?”

Breakfast. Yes, breakfast would work to put some distance between them and let her get her fantasies back under control. “Okay.”

He patted her arm. "For a woman whose job is words, you seem to have very few of them at the moment."

* * *

They were somewhere over Tennessee when Georgie fell asleep. She dreamed of Clay, of him slipping his arm over her shoulders to pull her against his side.

"Georgie?" He whispered her name.

"What?" She whispered back.

"I think I'm going to kiss you now."

She sighed, wanting to feel his lips on hers. "You think?"

"I know I want to."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Um...yeah. Okay." Inside the dream she wanted to bang her head on the table. What was up with her managing to only say okay?

She focused on his mouth. Full lips. Firm. Hints of smile lines at the corners.

He plucked her glasses from the end of her nose and set them aside on the table. The corner of his mouth quirked as he looked at her.

"What will you taste like?" dream Clay asked. "Dessert sweet and rich? Or twenty-year-old scotch, a smoky burn in my mouth? I can't wait to find out."

He lowered his head and his lips brushed across hers. She licked her bottom lip, her tongue darting out to sample the taste

of him. He moved in again, no hesitation this time. His lips fastened onto hers, sucking in her bottom lip as his teeth nipped. One hand secured the back of her head, angling it to the perfect position for his tender attack.

Normally bold in her fantasies about Clay, she now felt shy and her actions mirrored her emotions. Her hands, hesitant and timid, latched onto his leather jacket—he always wore leather in her dreams—and clung there as though her life depended on it. Emotions rushed through her and a little voice said she should run. Ignoring it, Georgie pressed into their kiss, her tongue now bold enough to dance with his—until he pulled away.

“Georgie, wake up. We’re getting ready to land.” Breathing hard, she opened her eyes to discover that Clay was watching her, amusement twitching his lips into a sexy grin.

“Oh, pistachios on pita. Please tell me I wasn’t talking in my sleep.”

Four

Clay smoothed his features into a neutral expression. He had heard his name on her lips several times, and the little smooching noises and puckering of her lips was both cute and...arousing. While he’d surely like to know the details, there would be a time and place to discover what Georgie dreamed about—and specifically his role in those dreams—but this wasn’t it.

“Do you make a habit of talking in your sleep?” He snapped his mouth shut, shocked he’d pursued the subject.

Georgie pushed her glasses up her nose and stared at him. Her

forehead crinkled and her lips pursed as she gave the question serious thought. “I...don’t know, seeing as I’m usually asleep. Would you like me to set up a recorder to find out?”

She looked so serious, Clay hesitated a few seconds before laughing. He opened his mouth to say the first thing that popped into his head, but stopped as innate political instincts kicked in. Offering to watch her sleep at night was not a smart move. He relayed a stern warning to all interested body parts. Georgie was an employee and off-limits. Period.

“Would you?” He wanted to head-slap himself. And shut up. Yes, keeping his mouth shut would be a good thing right about now.

“Ah, Clay?”

Boone. Thank goodness. His cousin could always be counted on to pull his butt out of the fire. Clay turned away from Georgie and focused on his chief of staff. “What’s up?”

Boone had to clear his throat before speaking and he wouldn’t quite meet Clay’s gaze. The words that came out were strained as he tried to stifle his laughter. “Transport is waiting at the airport. We’ll head straight to the office. And you have an email from your sister-in-law.”

“Cassidy?”

“Only sister-in-law I’m aware of.”

“What about?”

“Thanksgiving.”

“Thanksgiving?”

“Yes. As in, are we coming home for the holidays? A question also being asked repeatedly by my mother.”

“I don’t have time.”

Boone glanced toward Georgie. “Take Georgie home with you. Make it a long working weekend. And give her time to slide home to see her dad.”

“My dad?” Georgie sounded surprised. “Thanksgiving? He and his buddies go hunting in Montana every year.”

Studying her for a long moment, Clay considered his next comment. “Sounds like your Thanksgivings are a lot like mine. Boone, email Cassie and tell her I’ll be in touch for the details.”

After Boone returned to his seat and buckled up, Clay noticed Georgie’s hands were a little white-knuckled as she gripped the table. “Problem?”

“I don’t like landings. Takeoffs? Not thrilled but I’m fine. Landings?” She blinked at him a few times and her bangs brushed the tops of her glasses as she wrinkled her forehead. “Yeah, not so much.”

Prying one hand free, he laced his fingers through hers. “Good to know I’m not the only one.” He squeezed gently. “Hold my hand to make me feel better? Boone gets all weird when I ask him to do it.”

An odd little noise that was a cross between a giggle and snort burst from her and she tucked her teeth between her pressed lips to hold back the full laugh. “I can imagine.”

Her green eyes flashed in the sunlight streaming through the

plane window as the pilot banked to line up on the runway. “Don’t tell my constituents.”

She gestured with her free hand, miming zipping her lips, pressing them closed. “Mmm nnnllps er hhed.”

“Your lips are sealed?”

Georgie nodded vigorously. “We wouldn’t want the voters to know their favorite senator is a ’fraidy cat.”

“Good to know I can trust you.” It struck him then. He could trust Georgie. She’d become an integral part of his inner cadre but he’d never considered the trust he bestowed on her as she moved into her current position. He reflected on what he knew of her. While usually on the quiet side, she didn’t back down easily when she believed herself to be right. And she had a wicked sense of humor, most often directed at Boone.

A flash of jealousy zinged through him. Was there something between Boone and Georgie? Boone called her sugar. All the time. Damn it. But if there was something going on, why should Clay care?

The plane touched down and the engines whined as the pilot applied brakes, diverting him from his thoughts.

Leaving the ground crew to deal with luggage, Clay, Boone and Georgie headed toward his senate offices, driven by Glen with Hunter riding shotgun. The SUV forged through the typically heavy Washington traffic, bullying its way from Dulles to the Russell Senate Office Building in a drive that took almost forty-five minutes. Turning left onto Delaware, the vehicle rolled

to a smooth stop just past the main entrance on the southwest corner of the building.

Hunt was out of the front seat and opening doors even as his eyes roved the surroundings in a threat assessment. As Boone stepped out first, his brother tilted his head. “Shark at three o’clock.”

Boone snorted as he helped Georgie and then Clay out. “Parker Grace is headed this way.”

“Senator! Senator Barron!”

Georgie schooled her features to keep her thoughts from leaking into her expression. A reporter for a local television station, Parker Grace scurried toward them, her four-inch heels clattering against the concrete sidewalk. With her perfectly coiffed platinum hair and inch-long eyelashes fluttering over blue eyes, the woman was always the epitome of feminine perfection. And Georgie hated her for it.

Parker’s gaze flicked over her and then focused on Clay. “Senator, do you care to make a comment about your affair with a staff member?”

Sugar would have melted on the woman’s tongue, but the vinegar beneath her words soured Georgie’s stomach. She stepped up beside Clay, prepared to do her job, but Boone cut her off.

“Really, Parker? You get demoted to the gossip beat or something?”

The woman flushed but kept her microphone waving toward

Clay. “Those pictures from Scottsdale are fairly explicit, Senator, and word has leaked out that Ms...” The reporter’s gaze once again washed over Georgie and dismissed her. “Your...assistant was seen leaving your suite after spending the night there. Care to comment?”

Once again, Boone cut Georgie off and she fumed at being usurped. “Parker, Parker, Parker. Did your sources also say that I was staying in the same suite, in my capacity as the senator’s chief of staff, along with his security chief, other security personnel and Ms. Dreyfus, the senator’s communications director?”

Georgie couldn’t remain silent any longer. “Seriously, Grace? You want to go there?”

“Most people would, Dreyfus. How wonderfully *Fifty Shades*. The mousy press secretary and the handsome, powerful senator.”

Georgie laughed. “Oh, apple pie, my eye. What have you been smoking?” Georgie gripped the woman’s arm and tugged her away from the others, though the cameraman followed. Lowering her voice, she fluttered her lashes in perfect imitation of Parker. “Ooh, Senator, I’d love to get my gold-digging claws into your trust fund.”

The guy with the camera huffed out a snort and rolled his eyes as Georgie stepped even closer to the reporter, her palm covering the microphone. “You want to get up and personal with me, Grace, bring it. But this vendetta you have because you threw yourself at the senator and he had the good taste to ignore you needs to stop. Don’t make me go to your producers.”

Arching a brow, Georgie waited. She had information Parker didn't—mainly that Barron Entertainment owned the majority shares in the station the reporter worked for. And she was fairly positive that a word to Boone would result in a phone call to Chase Barron, Barron Entertainment CEO.

“Don't threaten me, Georgeanne Dreyfus,” the other woman hissed. When Georgie just continued to stare, Parker blanched. “You wouldn't dare.”

“Let's get everything out in the open, Parker. When it comes to the senator, there's very little I wouldn't dare. I'm telling you unequivocally there is not, nor has there ever been anything of a romantic nature between Senator Barron and me. If you want to go fishing in that pond, be careful what bait you use. You never know what you might catch on the end of your line. Some things out there in the water bite. Hard.”

Parker assessed her with a questioning eye but Georgie didn't flinch. “When did you get so tough, little girl?”

“Honey, I'm an Oklahoma cowgirl. We're born tough. And don't you forget it.” Georgie offered the cameraman a sympathetic look as Parker stormed away, her ridiculous heels tap-tap-tapping on the pavement. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

He snorted again and with a resigned slump of his shoulders, followed the retreating talent.

“I am still capable of speaking for myself, Georgie.”

Startled by the voice in her ear, she whirled and almost tipped over when she bumped into Clay—who was standing

inordinately close. Heat crept up her cheeks and she settled her glasses more firmly on her nose. “The last time I checked, talking to reporters is still in my job description.”

“So...Parker had a thing for me, huh?”

Her mouth dropped open and she closed it, only to gape again as Boone chuckled and nudged Clay’s shoulder with his. “I told you so.” He held out his hand. “Pay up, cuz.”

Georgie snapped her mouth shut again. “Wait...you made a bet? On what?”

While Boone tried to look innocent, she didn’t fall for it. “Please don’t tell me you were betting on me confronting her.”

A wickedly sinful grin spread across Clay’s face. “Okay. We won’t tell you.” He snagged her arm and headed toward the building’s entrance. “But I would appreciate knowing the next time a sexy woman finds me desirable. Men need to know these things.”

Sputtering, Georgie allowed Clay to tow her along beside him. Jealousy flared hot as a sparkler on the 4th of July and she stuffed it deep. As they entered the Russell’s rotunda, Clay leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“And for your information, I find nothing mousy about you.”

* * *

Three weeks later Clay sprawled in the desk chair in the study at the Barron family compound in Oklahoma City, feet propped on the scarred desktop. Despite his busy schedule, he’d caved to his sister-in-law’s demand for a family Thanksgiving gathering.

He'd insisted it was a working break and brought Georgie with him. They were currently dealing with his upcoming schedule. Georgie, all business, stood at the whiteboard ticking off a list when his nephew plowed into the room. "Uncle Clay! Aunt Cassie says time to eat. You gots to come now, 'kay?" The boy was all but bouncing out of his cowboy boots and Clay wasn't quite sure how to respond. Cord, his next younger brother, had almost died earlier in the fall. During his recovery, he'd reconnected—sort of—with his ex-girlfriend, only to discover he had a son. CJ looked like a Barron and Clay remembered when Cord and Chance had been filled with the same energy.

He'd been their caretaker during their mother's final illness and death from cancer. Their father hadn't wanted to deal with the domestic situation so he didn't. Cyrus Barron had done what he did best: abandoned his parental responsibilities. And after the accidental death of his first stepmother, Clay had also taken on the twins, Chase and Cash, when Cyrus pulled his disappearing act.

Dropping his feet to the floor, Clay pushed out of the chair and joined CJ at the door. "You heard the little man, Georgie. Aunt Cassie says it's time to eat." He ruffled the boy's hair. "Has your dad explained about the wishbone?"

CJ's eyes widened and he nodded like a bobblehead dog on the dash of a car driving down a rough road. "Yup. Uncle Cash 'n' me get to break it an' I get something cool when I win. C'mon! There's pie and hot rolls and sweet taters."

Holding the door, Clay gestured for Georgie to precede him, a part of him oddly gratified she'd agreed to come home with him for the weekend. Granted, they'd mostly been closeted in this small study since their arrival the previous day so he hadn't had much interaction with anyone besides her, but wasn't that the point? She was a buffer between him and his brothers, in much the same way that she stood between him and the press.

The meal went as family gatherings usually did in the Barron household, at least when Cyrus was absent—lots of teasing, gooey glances between Chance and his not-so-new bride as Miz Beth and Big John presided over the festivities like the surrogate parents they'd been since coming into the brothers' lives. When the time came for the wishbone pull, Cash—as the youngest brother—made a halfhearted attempt at the tradition with CJ. When the boy won, Cash pushed away from the table and strode out, angry over something.

Clay considered following his baby brother but CJ's sly wish about getting his mom and dad back together kept him in his seat as Cord stammered his way through an explanation of why that wouldn't happen. With the cleanup underway and football-watching to follow, Clay took the opportunity to slip back into the study.

Almost two hours later his father strode in. Clay glanced up at the intrusion, surprised since Chance had assured everyone that Cyrus was in Las Vegas for the duration. He sat up straighter, recognizing the set of the man's shoulders and the expression on

his face.

“We need to talk.” The old man glowered, anticipating he’d vacate the chair behind the desk. Clay didn’t indulge him.

Irritated now more than when he’d walked in, his old man lowered himself into a less comfortable chair and didn’t wait to fire the opening volley. “Get your brothers. We have family business.”

Clay didn’t like the derisive tone in his father’s voice. “What sort of family business?”

“Cord and my grandson and that woman who wants to ruin them both. Now get the hell out of my chair. We’ll talk more after I deal with your thickheaded brother.”

Doing as he was told but dragging his feet, he went in search of his brothers. He found Cash first and received a curt nod and sneer for his trouble. “I’ll round up everyone and then text Cord to meet us in the conference room,” Cash informed him.

Cash’s reaction and obvious previous knowledge of the situation left a bitter taste in Clay’s mouth. His youngest brother had once been the most easygoing of them all—rivaling even Cord for being laid-back. He wondered what had happened to turn Cash into the man he currently was.

With reluctance, Clay headed to the conference room and sank into the chair at one end of the table. During the “family intervention” his father demanded Cord sue for full custody of CJ, and made other more personal demands about CJ’s mother, Jolie. It left Clay slightly angered—at his father, at his baby

brother, but proud of Cord and Chance for standing up to the old man. He should probably do the same, though a heavy sense of dread hung over him as he followed his father back into the study.

“What are your plans?”

“My plans for what?”

“The election.”

“As you well know, I’m forming an exploratory committee.”

“You need to declare early. Scare off the competition.”

“This may not be the right cycle to run.”

“Bull. You will campaign, get the party’s nomination, and we’ll make a successful run at the presidency.”

“We,” Clay said in a clipped tone, letting the pronoun hang in the emotionally charged atmosphere.

“I can’t trust you not to mess it up. I’ll be there every step of the way. I have some things to deal with here but I’ll be in Washington next week. We’ll get things started.”

Despite the urge, and a certain need to do so, Clay didn’t argue. A smart man picked his battles with the old man. This wasn’t the time or the place.

Five

Even now, late on a snowy December day when his colleagues were preparing to flee Washington for their home districts, Clay glared at the files highlighted in the pool of stark white LED light shining on his desk. He pretended he was too busy to make it home for the holidays but in reality, he didn’t want to deal with the family drama happening back in Oklahoma. The intervention

at Thanksgiving involving Cord, the mother of his child and the boy himself soured Clay's stomach. As much as he'd enjoyed meeting his nephew and reconnecting with his brothers, overall, succumbing to his new sister-in-law's plea to appear for the family gathering had been an unmitigated disaster. And he still had his old man all up in his political business.

A peal of laughter floated through his half-opened office door. Georgie. She'd been the one high point in the Thanksgiving travesty. He'd all but begged her to accompany him, his excuse that she was the best speechwriter on the Hill and he had precampaign stops to make on the way back to Washington. In truth, he'd needed her there to insulate him from the dysfunction surrounding his family. Her presence and clear head kept him centered.

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