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GREAT
VALUE

MASTER OF FORTUNE

Katherine Garbera

MARRYING THE LONE STAR MAVERICK

Sara Orwig



Desire™

Katherine Garbera

**Master of Fortune / Marrying
the Lone Star Maverick:
Master of Fortune / Marrying
the Lone Star Maverick**

«HarperCollins»

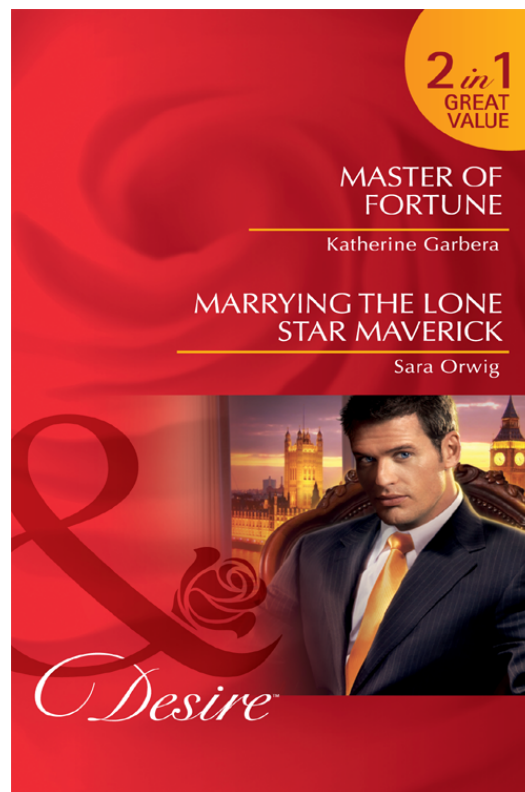
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Master of Fortune / Marrying the Lone Star Maverick: Master
of Fortune / Marrying the Lone Star Maverick / K. Garbera —
«HarperCollins»,

Master of FortuneIf Henry Devonshire wished to inherit his dying father's empire, he had to make Everest Records a huge success. And the one person who could help him, Astrid Taylor, was also the only woman he wanted. Mixing business with pleasure was never wise, but this time, it could literally cost Henry more than he was prepared to lose! Marrying the Lone Star Maverick He needed a wife...fast. And his lovely new assistant would do just fine. After all, the heat between him and Holly was becoming impossible to resist. And a no-strings marriage would certainly work for both of them. Yet once he put the ring on her finger, Jeff wondered could he keep feelings out of this in-name-only union?

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MASTER OF FORTUNE

KATHERINE GARBERA

MARRYING THE LONESTAR MAVERICK

SARA ORWIG



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Astrid seemed to sparkle with life as she moved on the dance floor, and Henry wanted to be the only one who basked in that glow.

He kept one hand on her hip as they danced. Her body brushed against his, teasing him with each rhythmic move she made. He wanted more than those fleeting touches. He wanted her breasts pressed solidly against his chest, his hands holding her hips and that tempting mouth of hers under his.

The music stopped, but he scarcely noticed. The crowd applauded, and in the back of his mind Henry realized that he'd found the first group he'd sign to the Everest Records label. But he'd also found something else, he thought.

Astrid watched him with those big brown eyes of hers, and he leaned in and kissed her. He didn't think about consequences or warnings. Didn't think about winning or business. Just thought that this woman was temptation incarnate and he was tired of denying himself.

MASTER OF FORTUNE

KATHERINE GARBERA

About the Author

KATHERINE GARBERA is a strong believer in happily-ever-after. She's written more than thirty-five books and has been nominated for Romantic Times Book Club's career achievement awards in Series Fantasy and Series Adventure. Her books have appeared on bestseller list for series romance and on the *USA Today* extended bestsellers list. Visit Katherine on the web at www.katherinegarbera.com.

Dear Reader,

Astrid Taylor is a girl who's made some bad choices when it comes to love. She lost her last job after a disastrous office romance, and the last thing she wants is to find her new boss attractive. But Henry Devonshire is the kind of man who can shake even the strongest resolve, and he does for Astrid.

Henry Devonshire was born into scandal. One of three illegitimate heirs born to Malcolm Devonshire in the same year, he's always been hounded by the media. His mother is Seventies pop sensation Tiffany Malone. So Henry's not a man who has a conventional set of morals. So the fact that Astrid is technically off limits makes her all that more appealing to the former rugby star.

Their romance is really, at the heart, about two people who have been searching for acceptance in who they are. They fall in love not because of their differences but in spite of them.

I hope you enjoy the first book in the DEVONSHIRE HEIRS mini-series. I had a lot of fun researching and writing these stories.

Happy reading!

Katherine

This book is dedicated to Rob, Courtney, Lucas, Josh and Tabby for making our summer in England so much fun and for putting up with me saying, "Just one more photo!!"

Acknowledgements:

I'd like to thank my good friend Kenny Howes for answering my questions about the music industry; Kenny has been rocking out for as long as I've known him. Any mistakes in this book are my own.

I'd also like to thank Krista Stroeve for all of her hard work on editing this manuscript.

Also a quick shout out to my friends who always have my back: Nancy and Mary Louise—you guys rock!

Prologue

“Why are we here?” Henry Devonshire asked. He sat in the boardroom of the Everest Group in downtown London. A nice view of the Thames was visible through the plate-glass windows.

“Malcolm has prepared a message for you.”

“Why should we listen to this?” Henry faced the lawyer across the polished boardroom table.

“I think you’ll find your father’s—”

“Malcolm. Don’t call him my father.”

The Everest Group had always been Malcolm Devonshire’s life. Of course, now that he’d turned seventy, it was no surprise that the old man had gotten in touch with him and his half brothers. He probably wanted to make sure that his life’s work didn’t end with his own death.

Geoff was the eldest of the three of them. Henry couldn’t really say much about the other men. He didn’t know either of his half brothers any better than he did their biological father. Geoff’s very aristocratic English-looking nose betrayed his place in the current royal family.

“Mr. Devonshire is dying,” Edmond Strom said. “He wants the legacy he worked so hard to create to live on in each of you.”

Edmond was Malcolm’s ... butler, Henry thought. Or maybe man of affairs would be more apt.

“He didn’t create the legacy for us,” Steven said. He was the youngest.

“Well, he has an offer for the three of you now,” Edmond said.

Henry had actually met his father’s lawyer and personal assistant more times than he had his father. Edmond had been the one to deliver Christmas and birthday presents when he’d been younger.

“If you would all please sit down and allow me explain,” Edmond said.

Henry took a seat at the end of the conference table. He had been a rugby player and a pretty good one to boot, but that had never gotten him the one thing he’d really craved—Malcolm’s acknowledgment of him. He couldn’t explain it any better than that. His own father had never recognized any of Henry’s accomplishments. So he had stopped looking for it and gone his own way.

Which didn’t explain why he was here now. Maybe it was simple curiosity about the old man.

Edmond passed three file folders across the table, one to each of them. Henry flipped his open and saw the letter his father had written to the three of them.

Geoff, Henry and Steven;

I have been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. I’ve exhausted every avenue to try to prolong my life and have now come to believe I only have six months left.

None of you owe me allegiance, but I hope that the company that brought me into contact with your mothers will continue to prosper and grow under your leadership.

Each of you will control one of the divisions. You will be judged on the profit you make in your segment. Whoever shows the best acumen for running their segment will be appointed CEO and Chairman of The Everest Group.

Geoff—Everest Airlines. His time as an RAF pilot and traveling the globe will serve him well.

Henry—Everest Records. I expect him to sign the music groups he’s already helped make their way up the charts.

Steven—Everest Mega Stores. Hopefully his genius for knowing what the retail public wants will not fail him.

Edmond will monitor your progress and make reports to me. I would have come to speak with you today, but my doctors have confined me to my bed.

I have one caveat. You must all avoid scandal and focus on running your segment or the deal is off, regardless of profit. The one mistake I made in my life was letting my personal life distract me from my business. I hope the three of you can benefit from my mistakes and I trust you will accept this challenge.

Yours,
Malcolm Devonshire

Henry shook his head. The old man had just said he considered their births a mistake. Henry had no idea how Geoff and Steven would feel about that, but it ticked him off. "I'm not interested."

"Before you turn down Malcolm's offer, you should know that if any of you opt out, the money that was put in trust for your mothers and for each of you will be forfeit upon his death. The company would retain it all."

"I don't need his money," Geoff said.

Henry didn't either, but his mother might. She and her second husband had two sons they were raising. Though Gordon made a decent wage as head coach for the London Irish, they could always use a little extra, especially since they'd have to pay for university for those boys.

"May we have a moment to discuss this alone?" Steven asked.

Edmond nodded and left the room. As soon as the door closed behind Edmond, Steven stood up.

"I think we should do it," Steven said.

"I'm not so sure," Geoff said. "He shouldn't put any stipulations on his will. If he wants to leave us something, so be it."

"But this affects our mums," Henry said, siding with Steven as he gave this more thought. Malcolm had broken off all contact with his mum once she was pregnant. That had always bothered him. He'd like to give her something of Malcolm's ... the thing that Malcolm had prized more than any of the actual living people who'd been in his life.

"It does affect them," Geoff said, leaning back in his chair as he thought it over. "I see your point. If you two are in then I'll do it, as well. I don't need his approval or his money."

"Me, either."

"So we're all in?" Henry asked.

"I am," Geoff said.

"I think he owes our mothers something on top of child support. And the chance to turn a bigger profit than he did? Now *that's* something I can't resist."

One

Astrid Taylor had started working for the Everest Group exactly one week ago, and her job as it had been described to her had sounded ... like a glorified nanny but it paid well and that was all that mattered right now. She was to be an assistant to one of Malcolm Devonshire's sons.

Her experience as an executive assistant for legendary record producer Mo Rollins had ensured she'd get the job with Everest Records. She was glad they hadn't asked too many questions about her dismissal from her last job.

"Hello, Ms. Taylor, I'm Henry Devonshire."

"Hello, Mr. Devonshire. I'm happy to make your acquaintance."

Henry held his hand out to her and she shook it. He had big blunt hands with neatly trimmed square nails. His square-jawed face sported a nose that looked as though it may have been broken more than once. Only fitting since he'd been a first-class rugby player until an injury sidelined him. He was still lean and athletic looking.

"I need you in my office in five minutes," he told her. "Bring everything you have on Everest Group Records. Financials, groups we have signed, groups we should drop."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Devonshire," she said.

He paused on the threshold before entering his inner office and smiled at her. "Call me Henry."

She nodded. Dang it, he had a perfect smile. The kind that left her feeling utterly gob smacked. Which was ridiculous. She'd read the reports in the tabloids and gossip magazines—he was a player. One with a different girl every night, she reminded herself.

"Please, call me Astrid," she said.

He nodded. "Have you been working here long?"

"Only a week. I was hired to work specifically with you."

"Good, then you won't be torn about who is in charge," he said.

"No, sir, you're the boss," she quipped.

"Indeed I am."

She started pulling together the reports he'd asked for. Since her career-ending affair at her last place of employment, she'd made a promise to herself to be utterly professional this time. She had always liked men and, to be honest, knew she flirted more than she should, but it was her way.

She watched him walk away. Flirting in the office was a bad idea, but he was charming. It wasn't as if Henry Devonshire was going to make a real pass at her. His social circles contained supermodels. But she'd always had a weakness for blue eyes and a charming smile. It didn't hurt matters that she'd had a little crush on Henry Devonshire when he'd been introduced as the starting flanker for the London Irish ten years ago.

So she was ready for Henry's requests. She had everything in a folder on her desktop and printed off the information for him. She also copied the file onto their shared server.

Her phone rang. Glancing down at the multiline unit, she saw that Henry was still on his extension.

"Everest Records, Henry Devonshire's office," Astrid said.

"We need to talk."

It was her old boss and former lover, Daniel Martin. Daniel was a bit like Simon Cowell, a record executive who turned everything he touched to gold. But when the gold lost its luster, Daniel moved on. Something Astrid had experienced firsthand.

"I don't think we have anything left to say." The last thing she wanted was to talk to Daniel.

"Henry Devonshire might feel differently. Meet me downstairs in that park area between City Hall and Tower Bridge in ten minutes."

"I can't. My boss needs me."

“He won’t be your boss for long if you don’t speak to me. I think we both know that. I’m not asking for too much of your time, just a few minutes.”

“Fine,” Astrid said, aware that Daniel could ruin her chances at Everest records with just a vaguely worded comment about her past job performance.

She wasn’t sure exactly what Daniel wanted—their relationship had ended so badly. Maybe he wanted to make amends now that she was back in the music industry. At least she could hope.

She sent Henry an instant message telling him she’d be right back and set her phones to go to voice mail. Five minutes later she was walking through the green area on the banks of the Thames. Lots of office workers were sitting outside on the smoke breaks.

Astrid hurried past them looking for Daniel. She saw his honey-blond hair first. The weather was cloudy and wet today and a little chilly, and Daniel was wearing his favorite Ralph Lauren trench coat with the collar turned up.

Despite the fact that she was over him, she couldn’t help but notice that he looked good. Women were watching him, and Astrid saw the disappointment on more than one girl’s face when he turned toward her. In the past she’d relished the envious stares of other women. Now she knew that they had nothing to be envious of. With Daniel Martin the charm was only surface deep.

“Astrid.”

“Hi, Daniel. I don’t have a lot of time. What did you want to see me about?”

“What do you think you are doing working for Everest Records?”

“They hired me. I needed a job since I’m not independently wealthy,” Astrid said.

“Don’t be glib.”

“I’m not trying to be. What are you really attempting to say?”

“That if you poach any of my clients ... I will ruin you.”

She shook her head. How could not know her at all? “I’d never do that. I’m not trying to get ahead by using someone else.”

“Just be warned. If you come anywhere near my clients, I will call Henry Devonshire and tell him everything that the tabloids didn’t uncover about our affair.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away from her. She just watched him leave, wondering how in the world she was going to protect herself from Daniel.

Hurrying back to the Everest Group skyscraper, she took the elevator up to her floor, not talking to anyone along the way.

She stopped in the doorway leading to Henry’s office. “May I come in?”

He was on the phone, so gestured for her to enter. She came in and placed the files he’d asked for on the corner of his desk.

“That sounds good. I’ll be there tonight at nine,” Henry said. “Two. There will be two of us.”

He hung up the phone and looked up at her. “Have a seat, Astrid.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you for the material you prepared. Before we dive into work, tell me a little about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?” she asked. Somehow, blurting out her entire past history didn’t seem prudent. And she’d learned that if she didn’t ask for specifics on questions like that one she ended up revealing things she could have kept hidden.

She was hoping that working at Everest Records would be the buffer she needed between her past and her future. A job that would keep her so busy she’d stop worrying about would-haves and could-haves and learn to live again.

“For starters, why are you working at the Everest Group?” he asked, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. The tight black sweater he wore pulled against the bulging muscles in his biceps. Clearly the man worked out, she thought.

“They hired me,” she said. After her talk with Daniel, she was afraid to say too much.

He laughed. “So it’s just a wage to you?”

She shrugged. “It’s a bit more. I really like music and being part of your team sounded like a lot of fun. A chance to see if we can find the next big thing ...” She shrugged. “I’ve always thought of myself as a trendsetter, so now I have a chance to see if I am.”

At one time she’d thought she might become a record producer. She understood the job and the hard work that went into it, but she’d figured out that she didn’t have the attitude needed to make it there. She couldn’t be passionate about the artists she promoted and then walk away from them when their sales started to tank. She liked to think she had integrity.

“That makes working for me easier, I think. I’m going to need you to be more my personal assistant than my secretary. You will be available 24/7. We won’t be keeping regular office hours, because I mean to make this division of Everest Group into the most profitable. Do you have any objections?”

“None, sir. I was told that this job would be demanding,” she said. She looked forward to it. She needed a demanding job to sink her teeth into. She needed the work to keep her so busy she never had time to think about her failed personal life.

He nodded and gave her that little half smile of his. “Normally we won’t be in this office. I’d like to work out of my home in Bromley or my apartment here in London. We will mainly be listening to music acts at night.”

“That’s fine, sir.” To be honest, she didn’t need a lot of sleep.

“Good, now down to business. I need you to set up a file to keep information from several talent scouts. I am also sending you an e-mail with the people who work for me,” he said.

She nodded and made notes as he continued to set out the terms of the job. Despite the fact that the papers made him out as a playboy, it seemed Henry had cultivated a network he could use for business.

“Is there anything else?”

“Yes. I’ve been pretty good at picking acts when I hear them at clubs, but I like a second opinion.”

She nodded. “Why do you think that is?”

“Probably since I’m the typical person that most of these labels are targeting. I am young, social and know the scene.” He nodded. “I think that has given me a good ear for trends. What about you, Astrid?”

“I love music.” When she’d first moved to London she had been in the thick of the nightlife. Her sister Bethann and she had shared a flat and worked menial jobs and went clubbing with friends most nights. But then Bethann had become a legal assistant and gotten engaged and her social life had changed. “Part of the reason I was hired was because I’d been a personal assistant to Daniel Martin.”

“What are you into?” he asked. “What kind of music do you like?”

“Something with soul,” she said.

“Sounds ...”

“Retro?”

“No, interesting.”

She left his office and tried to concentrate on the job ahead but she had enjoyed Henry—way too much for a boss. And he *was* her boss, something that she had to remember because she wasn’t interested in starting over again with a broken heart and an empty bank account.

Henry watched Astrid leave. His new PA was cute and funny and a bit cheeky. Having her in his office and on his team was going to make this job much more enjoyable.

Despite the fact that many people believed him to be nothing more than a celebrity sportscaster and philanthropist, Henry did have a serious side. He certainly played hard, but few people knew he worked even harder.

It was a lesson he'd learned from his stepfather, Gordon Ferguson. He'd first met Gordon when he was eight years old. Two years before his mum and Gordon married. Gordon was the head coach for the London Irish now but back then he had been one of the assistants. He'd helped Henry hone his rugby skills and made him into one of the best team captains of his generation.

Henry's office was on the top floor of the Everest Group building. It was situated in a corner with a nice view of the London Eye across the Thames. He glanced around the nicely appointed office, feeling a bit uncomfortable. He knew he couldn't work in a place as boxed in and sterile as this one.

He needed to get out of here. But first he wanted to know a little more about his assistant and about the task he'd taken on.

At first, when he'd heard Malcolm's offer, he didn't care if he won the challenge or not, but now that he was here, his competitive instincts were rising to the fore. He liked to win. There was a reason he'd been named as RFU Player of the Year. He liked being the best. He hungered for it.

He skimmed the reports that Astrid had prepared, making notes and trying not to remember how long Astrid's legs had appeared under that short skirt she'd had on. And her smile ... her mouth was full and tempting, and more than once when she'd been sitting there he'd wondered what her lips would taste like under his. Her mouth was wide, her lips plump, everything about her was irresistible.

Office romances weren't a good idea, but he knew himself and he was attracted to his assistant. He decided he wouldn't act on that attraction unless she showed some sign of interest in him. He needed her to win this challenge and to be honest, winning was more important than starting an affair.

"Henry?"

Astrid was standing in the doorway; her short curly hair brushed her cheeks. He really did like the slim-fitting skirt she wore—it was plaid and her black knee-high boots made her look tall. The plain black sweater clung to her breasts, and he realized he was staring when she cleared her throat.

"Yes, Astrid?"

"I need to pop down to legal to get Steph's offer details in to legal. You mind if I let my phone go unanswered?"

"No, not at all. That was quick." He was definitely going to like the perks that came with working in a large company. Being able to delegate tasks and have them done quickly—that was something he'd needed for a while.

Henry had been producing on his own in between handling his own endorsement deals for athletic shoes and soft drinks. He'd also hosted a kids' sports TV show that had run for two seasons. He liked the perks that went along with being a celebrity, but hadn't relished having to do so much of the legwork himself.

She smiled at him. "I aim to please."

"You've accomplished that," he said.

She left and he turned his chair so that he was facing the windows instead of watching the empty doorway. He'd always been a bit of a loner and that had suited him but having someone work for him ... she was like his butler, he thought.

Yeah, right. He'd never ogled Hammond's legs. Yet he had to remember that Astrid did work for him. His own mother's affair with her record producer had led to the end of her singing career and his birth. He wondered sometimes if she ever resented that, but she'd never said.

He brushed that thought away. This was a new century. Attitudes were different than they had been in the '70s. But he still didn't want to make Astrid feel uncomfortable in the office with him.

At the same time he knew that he wasn't going to be able to resist pulling Astrid into his arms before too long and finding out how good that sassy mouth of hers tasted under his.

His phone rang and he reached for it. "Devonshire here."

"Henry? This is your mum."

He loved how she always identified herself even though he could never mistake her for anyone else. "Hello, Mum. What's up?"

“I need a favor,” Tiffany Malone-Ferguson said. “Do you know anyone at Channel Four?”

He knew a few people there. And he was afraid that this was going to be another attempt for his mother to regain the limelight. When pop stars and celebrities from the ‘70s and ‘80s had started turning up on game-style shows on Channel Four, his mum went mad. She’d said that she could return to the spotlight now that his halfbrothers were older.

“I have talked to everyone I know over there more than once.”

“Will you try again? Gordon suggested I start a show like that American show *The Bachelor*, but for rugby players. I know the lifestyle and I could definitely help arrange suitable girls. Not those tart scrummies that always pop up in the tabloids.”

This idea wasn’t half-bad. He made a few notes and asked her more questions about her idea. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’re the best, Henry. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mum,” he said, disconnecting the call.

He held his mobile loosely in his hand for another minute until someone cleared their throat and he glanced up to see Astrid standing in his doorway.

“Yes?”

“I need your signature on these forms. The runner from talent scout Roger McMillan dropped this demo off with a note that they are playing tonight. And I’m going to need you to give me a little more information on Steph,” she said, holding a sheaf of papers out toward him.

He gestured for her to come in.

“Also the head of legal wants a meeting with you to discuss contract procedures. I know you said we’d be working out of your Bromley office, but the management staff have enquired about setting up meetings with you. Do you want me to direct them to your home office?”

He leaned back in his chair. “No. I think we’d better establish a day in the office each week for meetings. I have six direct reports, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have them all scheduled for tomorrow,” he said. He’d learned the hard way at rugby that if he didn’t go for his goals he’d never achieve them. And teamwork was paramount to winning.

“Astrid, bring me the personnel files on all of the staff. After I’ve reviewed them, you can schedule the meetings. Does anyone have anything that’s pressing?”

“Just legal and accounting. You need to be added to the signature authority card before you can sign this contract.”

“Do you have that form?” he asked.

“It’s at the bottom of your stack. I’ll walk it down to accounting once you sign it.”

He pulled the paper out of the stack and signed it. There were a few other housekeeping-type forms for him to sign. Astrid had prepared them with his name and flagged the places where he was supposed to sign.

“Thank you, Astrid,” he said, handing them back to her. “You’re a very efficient assistant. I’m sure Daniel was devastated to lose you.”

She flushed and looked away, but didn’t respond. “You’re welcome, sir. Was there anything else before I go?”

He stared at her mouth for a minute, knowing his obsession with her lips was going to get him into big trouble. All he really wanted was to taste them.

Two

Astrid hoped that Henry never called Daniel to find out why she left her last job. Despite how close she and Daniel had become during their affair she knew he wouldn't give her a good reference. Hell, he'd said as much earlier.

At the end ... there'd been all those sick days.... Daniel hadn't been very understanding. She wrapped an arm around her own waist as she struggled for a moment to keep the past where it belonged.

Astrid spent the rest of the day trying to stay focused on her job. But Henry seemed to need her in his office a lot as he got acclimated. And she found herself entranced just the tiniest bit.

He was smart and funny. Yet even innocent flirtations in the office were dangerous. Hadn't she learned that the hard way?

She walked down to the legal office and left the paperwork that Henry had signed with the proper legal secretary.

Henry's office was empty when she returned to her desk; she'd poked her head in his office to see if he needed anything. She'd listened to a few songs that Steph Cordo had sang ... and that she'd heard on the morning talk radio.

She downloaded the song on iTunes and added them to her playlist. One thing she'd learned working with Daniel was to be very familiar with the artists and groups that label was pursuing. So Steph was the first of many new artists she'd be listening to. It would help give her a feel for what Henry liked, too.

Henry entered the office a few minutes later with three other men, none of whom she knew. He directed the men into his office.

"Hold my calls," Henry said.

"Certainly, sir. May I speak to you for a moment?" she asked.

"What's up?"

"These men aren't on your calendar.... Do you not want me to make your appointments?"

"Oh, of course I do. I'm just not used to having an assistant," Henry said.

She nodded. "Do you need anything for the next thirty minutes?"

"That's pretty specific," Henry said.

"Sorry about that. I'd like to go for lunch. My sister just rang and said she could meet me," Astrid clarified.

"Go on then. I'll be in this meeting for at least that long."

"Do you want me to bring you back something?"

"No. I'm meeting my ... half brothers. That still sounds strange to me when I say it."

"I'd heard you all were getting together lately."

"Heard where?"

"Um ... well, I read about it in *Hello!*" Astrid refused to be apologetic about it. *Hello!* and other celebrity magazines were a resource for people in their industry. Daniel used to have her keep clippings of their artists so they could track their popularity.

"Gossip rags?"

She arched one eyebrow at him. "Where else would I hear about your meeting them? We don't exactly run in the same circles."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I know the feeling. They aren't my crowd either."

"No, celebrities and footballers are more your speed," she said. "I guess that's how you have your finger on the pulse of what's next."

"Maybe. I think it's more a feel for what the public is hungry for."

He had a point. "I think you're a very savvy man."

"I am," he said. "Before you head to lunch, will you call Marcus Wills for me? I'm supposed to have drinks with him, but I don't think I'll have time between meeting with the other Devonshire heirs."

"Not a problem. Do you have his number handy? I haven't merged your contents file with mine yet," she said.

"I'll IM it to you."

"Great. I'll take care of it."

He nodded and walked away, and she couldn't help but admire his butt. He stopped in the doorway and glanced back over his shoulder. She blushed when he gave her a knowing smile.

"I guess you still work out even though you don't play anymore," she said.

"Didn't *Hello!* magazine have the scoop on my gym membership?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, they didn't. I'm hoping to make a little on the side by selling them the exclusive story."

He threw his head back and laughed. And Astrid couldn't help chuckling along with him. He *was* fun and after the heartache she'd endured for the past year of her life she needed that.

"You'll do, Astrid."

She winked at him. "I know I will."

Henry went into his office, and Astrid made the call he'd asked her to before leaving to meet her sister, Bethann.

Bethann was sitting in the sun on one of the benches that lined the walkway along the Thames—the exact spot Astrid had met Daniel earlier. This part of London was newer and lined with glass-and-steel buildings, but across the river was the old Tower of London. Her sister looked up as she approached and waved.

Astrid hugged her sister as soon as she was close enough.

"How is the new job going?" Bethann asked.

"It's good. I think working for Henry is going to be just what I need. He's focused on signing new acts."

Bethann handed her a sandwich. "Be careful. The last job nearly ruined you."

She shook her head. It didn't matter that they were both grown woman; Bethann still thought of her as her baby sister who needed looking after.

"I am very aware of that. I just meant ... never mind."

Bethann reached over and put her arm around Astrid's shoulders. "I love you, sweetie. I don't want to see you hurt again."

"I won't be," Astrid said. She'd made up her mind when Daniel had fired her that she wouldn't be used again. Not by any man. But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy working for Henry.

Considering he, Geoff and Steve all had the same father, they didn't really have that much in common. If he had to guess why, he'd say it came down to their mothers: three very different women.

Malcolm had played fast and loose with all of their mothers. The paparazzi had photographed him leaving all of their residences, and Henry knew from things his mother had said that seeing Malcolm with his other lovers had slowly crushed her.

Tiffany had gone through a total confidence change in the six months leading up to his birth. No longer the brassy Irish singer who had melted men's hearts, she'd turned distrustful of compliments and started to doubt her own abilities as a singer.

The paps still dogged her even after she'd broken things off with Malcolm. But in later years she'd found happiness with Gordon—a kind of love, she told Henry when he'd asked her about it, that she'd never found with Malcolm. She'd said that her love with Malcolm had burned hot and fast but that Gordon was a slow burn. Henry hadn't understood that as a teenage boy, but as a man he was starting to.

He was very aware the paparazzi were probably having a field day seeing the three brothers together now, which was why they'd chosen to meet at The Athenaeum Club instead of a pub. He'd learned as a youngster that ignoring them and going about his life was the only way to be happy.

And happiness was one of his chief concerns. He saw Geoff sitting on a high stool at a table in the back of the establishment and nodded to acknowledge him.

Henry was stopped several times by fans from his playing days as he walked through the pub. Henry exchanged a few words with every one of them. Shook their hands and signed napkins and scraps of paper. His stepfather had always said that players should remember without the fans they'd be back on their local pitch playing for fun instead of money.

And his fans had made him very wealthy.

Geoff was on the phone, seated at the back of the club. So Henry took his time. Everyone always wanted to know whom he favored in the 6 Nations game—a tournament held between the first nations to play each other in rugby. Originally it had been England vs. Scotland, but over time had grown to include Ireland, Wales, France and Italy, as well. And it went without saying that Henry always favored the home team.

As he approached Geoff, the other man motioned he'd be another minute, so Henry detoured to the bar and ordered a beer. He wasn't too keen on this get-to-know-you meeting, but both Steven and Geoff had outvoted him, so to speak.

He brought his drink back to the table where Geoff was as the other man disconnected his call. Geoff stood and shook his hand.

"Where's Steven?"

"His secretary called and said he'd be running late today."

"I can't stay long. I've got things to take care of before I hit the clubs tonight. How'd you like your first day?"

Geoff arched one eyebrow at him. "Probably as well as you did. The airline is a well-oiled machine, and I think we should be able to show a large profit during the terms of the will."

Henry realized that Geoff expected to win. Probably by order of his birth he should inherit the entire Everest Group but Henry wasn't ready to back down and give up the fight. It would take signing just one phenomenal group for his segment to outperform Geoff's airline. And Henry was damned determined to make sure he found it.

"How's the record label?"

"Good. It's in good shape and I have the right people in place."

"I always heard you were a team player," Geoff said.

"It's served me well all my life," Henry said.

"Good to hear it."

Henry had heard that Steven and Geoff were both loners. Steven's mother was a twin. And, according to the media, very close to her extended family.

His mobile beeped and he glanced down to see that a text from Astrid had arrived. He skimmed it and turned his attention back to his Guinness. He and Geoff talked about sports and Henry noticed that the other man was uncomfortable with him.

Geoff had grown up in the spotlight as part of the royal family. Henry wondered if being around a rugby man such as himself was what bothered Geoff. Though rugby was a ruffian sport, it had always been played by those of the middle and upper classes.

"Do you see your mum much?"

"Every Sunday for brunch," Henry said. His mother had done her best by him. Making sure that he grew up in comfortable surroundings with the family she'd created for them. Being left by Malcolm Devonshire hadn't put her off her dreams of family.

"That's good. My cousin Suzanne is a huge fan..."

“Does she want an autograph or a chance to meet her?” Henry said. His mum was just that, his mum, but he was very aware that to other people she was a pop star. And despite the fact that she hadn’t had a hit in fifteen years, she was still very popular. And when he’d been in secondary school, all of his mates had listened to her records. Tiffany couldn’t walk down the street without being recognized.

Geoff laughed. “She’d settle for an autograph.”

“Send me her name and I’ll get Mum to autograph a picture for her.”

“Thanks. If there’s ever anything I can do for you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Steven showed up a few minutes later. “A girl is at the front desk asking for you, Henry.”

“A girl?”

“Astrid something. I told them I’d let you know.”

“Thanks. I guess that means I need to go.”

“Do you?” Geoff asked. “Who is she?”

“My new assistant, Astrid Taylor.”

Steven signaled the butler and ordered a drink. Geoff rubbed the back of his neck.

“Did she used to work for Daniel Martin?”

“Yes, I believe she did. Why?”

“I recall reading something in the business journal about it. She sued them because they didn’t give her adequate exit benefits. Just be careful.”

“I always am,” Henry said. “I know a lot about building a winning team.”

“I’ll say. Do you have time for another drink before you go meet her?” Steven said as his drink arrived.

Henry wasn’t sure and being indecisive didn’t sit well with him. He shook his head. “I better not. We have a couple of meetings tonight. I appreciate the information Geoff. I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Geoff laughed. “I sound like my sisters passing gossip.”

“You have sisters?” Steven asked.

Henry had to laugh at that. They’d been linked ... well their *names* had since their birth, but they were virtual strangers.

“I have two younger brothers,” Henry said.

“I’m an only child.” Steven took a sip of his drink. “But we can talk about siblings later.”

“I’m not sure I trust Malcolm not to throw something else at one of us,” Geoff said.

“I agree. I’m surprised even being faced with his mortality has made him contact us,” Henry said.

“Too right,” Geoff added.

“I don’t give a damn about his legacy,” Steven said. “I’m in this for the money and the challenge.”

Henry laughed at the way Steven said that. This man was someone who just said what he wanted, to hell with the consequences.

“I see your point.”

“Good ... on that note, I think you should know that I’ve been contacted by a magazine ... Fashion Quarterly—”

“Isn’t that a woman’s magazine?” Henry asked. His mum loved the magazine and read it cover to cover each month.

“Yes, it is. The editor-in-chief needed a favor from me and I helped her out in exchange for a promise to run some articles on us in her magazine.”

“On us?” Geoff asked. “Everything I do has to go through the Royal Press Office.”

“It’s on our mums actually since it’s a woman’s mag but they will mention our business units and do a bit of a showcase on each one as well,” Steven said.

“My mum will love that,” Henry said.

"I'm not so sure about this," Geoff said.

"Just talk to her," Steven said. "We need the publicity and this is a nice angle."

"I'm in. You don't need to convince me," Henry said, glancing at his watch. "Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"I like your idea of using the airlines to promote the album covers," Geoff said. "So I'll be calling you tomorrow or the next day to get a team together to move that idea forward."

"I'll look forward to your call," Henry said. "Steven, I've got a few ideas for using the Everest Mega Store to promote my newer artists. Do you have time to meet with me this week?"

"I do. Shoot me over an e-mail with your availability and we will make it work," Steven said. "I have to go to New York to check out our North American operation."

"Indeed," Henry said. "So we're doing this again next week?"

"Yes. I think a weekly check-in is a good idea," Steven said.

Henry left his half brothers and walked slowly through the club. He didn't worry about Malcolm because that man was a stranger to him just like Steven and Geoff, and he was the type of man who didn't worry about the future. He'd take care of what he needed to.

And right now that involved finding out a little more about Astrid and her past employer.

He spotted her standing at the coat check. She was talking on her mobile and turned around as he came down the stairs. She waved at him and smiled.

He smiled back, thinking that talking to his assistant was going to be very enjoyable.

Astrid hung up the phone as Henry joined her. He looked good in his trendy casual clothing. He wore gray trousers and a button-down shirt left open at the collar with a navy blue sport coat that made his eyes seem brighter. He smiled at her as he approached, and she just stood there for a minute not saying anything.

It didn't help that he was one of the rugby players she'd had an insane crush on when she was a teenager, which made it harder for her to see him as her boss now that they weren't in the office.

"Hello, Astrid. What did you need me for?"

"A signature. Without one your staff isn't going to get paid," she said. They all got paid monthly, so missing a pay period could put a lot of the staff in a bind. And since she'd only just started at Everest Records she didn't have the relationships needed to finesse the payroll clerks into giving her an extra day.

She handed him the papers and he signed them with a flourish. His signature had style just like the man.

Oh, for God's sake, she thought. She was developing a crush on him. On her boss! This had to stop.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Are you going back to the office now?"

"No I have a runner waiting for this packet. I'm supposed to meet you in fifteen minutes and I'd never make it on time."

"No, you wouldn't. Did you eat yet?" he asked.

She shook her head. There hadn't been time. She handed the packet to the runner she'd brought with her, and he took it and left.

"Want to grab a bite?" Henry asked. "I'm hungry."

"Sounds good."

He led the way out of the club. "Do you have a car?"

"No. I take the underground mostly. Congestion charges and parking are outrageous," she said.

"That they are. There's a congestion charge around my neighborhood. I have to pay to drive home." Traffic was a major problem in some London areas, so a charge had been introduced to ease traffic flow during certain hours.

"Not many days," she said. "I hear you get home in the wee hours of the morning."

He chuckled. "That's true. But if I kept respectable hours I'd have to pay."

"You do now with the job," she said.

"That's true," he said. "What about you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Is this job keeping you respectable?"

She had no idea what Henry was after with his questions. The valet brought his car around and after she was seated in the Ferrari Enzo, Henry put the car in gear. He drove with confidence and skill, negotiating the traffic with ease. She couldn't help but admire the way that he drove. She was beginning to believe there was little that Henry didn't do well.

"Of course it is."

"Did your last job, working for Mo Rollins's group, do the same?"

She had a sinking feeling that he'd checked her employment record. Had he found out about her affair? Bethann had suggested to her before she'd taken this job at Everest Records that she should work in another industry, but the record industry was all she knew.

"I took that job really seriously, Henry. I was a good employee and supported Daniel in every way I could."

"But he still let you go," Henry said.

"I had a health issue," she said. This was a nightmare, she thought. When she'd been in the throes of her affair with Daniel it had never occurred to her that someday she'd be answering questions about why she no longer worked for him.

Henry braked to a stop as they neared Kensington High Street. She knew he planned to check out Roof Gardens, the eclectic nightclub owned by Richard Branson, tonight.

"Babylon okay for dinner?" he asked.

"Yes." She'd never eaten at the trendy high-priced restaurant before. When she'd been with Daniel, even when they'd been dating, they had tended to stay more to economical places. Daniel only spent money on his clients.

Henry pulled up to the valet stand and got out. Astrid climbed out on her side and wished for a moment she'd taken time to dress a bit differently for her day. She was already realizing that Henry was different. That didn't mean he would treat her better than Daniel had. This was a job, she thought. *Nothing more.* The measure of the man she worked for was better than her previous boss. And she knew she was going to have to change and probably grow a bit to keep up with him. She shifted the strap of her large shoulder bag and hurried around to the sidewalk so she was next to him.

There were a few paps—paparazzi—who took some photos of Henry. She stepped back so he could be photographed alone. He posed and talked to the photographers and signed a few autographs before reaching for her hand and drawing her up the path to the entrance.

She knew that Henry hadn't finished questioning her about her past and Daniel. She also decided if she played her cards right, she could keep him off the topic tonight.

"Does that happen to you often?" she asked when they checked their coats downstairs.

He smiled ruefully. "Yes. I'm used to it, though. My mum says that it's part of our life being in the spotlight. I grew up around it. I don't court them, but if they want a photo I give them one."

"Isn't it intrusive?" she asked.

He stopped and pulled her toward a quiet corner. "It's my life. I don't think about it. When I was a player, I didn't like them because they were a distraction and some of the other players would let the paps keep them from concentrating on the game. But now, they are what keeps my lifestyle going forward," he said.

"You're a very smart man," she said, coming to the conclusion that the showman, the charming playboy that he projected to the world was just one of the many facets of the whole man.

"Indeed. So that's why I'm not going to let you distract me from the fact that you still haven't told me everything about your last employer."

Three

Astrid tossed her head to the side and gave him a look that told him he was going to have to be subtler if he wanted to find out about her past. He nodded and took her arm leading her to the maître d' stand. They were seated shortly at an intimate table for two that had a nice view. He realized he didn't want to look at anyone but Astrid.

She was a mass of contradictions and she fascinated him.

"I think the London music scene is really hot right now. So many little local acts are making it big, not just here but in the States."

"But are they ready for it?" Henry asked.

"I'm not sure they are. You've grown up in the spotlight and you know how different it is from the paps in the States. I think that some of the groups aren't really ready to handle the fame that they achieve so quickly. And the American market can be fickle."

"Yes, they can. I've been trying to caution Steph that making it big there will mean a meteoric rise, but it could be followed by quite a crash."

"It's good that you've taken the time to talk to her. I can help with that, as well. I listened to her music earlier today and the demo that Roger dropped off. I also think I know some venues that will suit the style of music you're looking for."

"And what kind is that?"

"Something with a hook, of course, that is catchy and that people will remember. But I think you're also looking for music that has some heart to it."

He nodded. She did indeed know what he was looking for. That made him uncomfortable. He liked to play at being an easygoing guy that everyone knew and who in turn knew everyone, but in reality he kept himself distant. The only woman he could really claim to know well was his mother. And she was, by anyone's definition, eccentric.

But Astrid was different. She was calm and quiet at times. Like now.

"How long did you work for the Mo Rollins Group and Daniel Martin?" he asked. Mo Rollins was a legendary producer who had established his own label after leaving Sony-BMG. Daniel was one of his up and coming protégé.

"Only eighteen months, but I had worked as one of the assistants to Mo's executive assistant for more than three years before that."

"Did you like it?" he asked. It made no sense that she'd leave that job and then come work for him. If she wanted to work in the music industry, then the job had been ideally suited for her. Henry told himself that he wasn't asking her because he was curious about the woman. He needed to know about her past because she was part of his team and he needed to know every nuance of his team if they were going to be a success.

"I loved it," she said, putting down her wineglass. She leaned across the table and put her hand over his. She had neatly painted nails and her hand was very soft against the back of his. Being a rugby player he'd always had calloused or bruised hands, but hers were soft and cool.

"I know you want to understand why I left such a high-profile job. There's a lot to it.... It was a highly personal health issue and I just don't—" She broke off, tears filling her eyes.

Henry turned his hand over under hers and held hers loosely in his grip. He understood about secrets and personal issues. He could hold off for now, but before too long he would know *all* of Astrid Taylor's secrets. HR had screened her and wouldn't have hired her if there was anything untoward in her past.

"Very well. Tonight you are going to meet Steph Cordo. Part of your role will be to act as an assistant to my stable of artists until they hire their own people," Henry said.

"Right. I've done that type of work before. I can handle that."

"I know you can handle it, Astrid. You're very adept at doing what needs to be done," he said. She flushed. "My sister says it's a gift."

"Really? Why?"

"Um ... I was always a bit of a suck up when we were younger. But being nice does open doors," she said with a wry little grin.

"Indeed."

Henry noticed he was still holding her hand. He stroked his thumb over her knuckles and watched her face. She flushed again and then pulled her hand back. She licked her lips, which were wide and full. Her mouth moved and he knew she was saying something, but for the life of him he couldn't concentrate on her words.

All he could do was watch them move. Stare at her white teeth and very pink lips and wonder how her mouth would feel under his.

"Henry?"

"Hmm?"

"The waiter asked if we wanted dessert," she said.

"Sorry, mate. I'm good. Would you like something, Astrid?"

She shook her head.

He asked for the check and Astrid excused herself to go to the ladies' room. It was odd that the old man had decided to get in touch with him now, but Henry thought that the job at Everest was going to be a fun challenge.

He'd long since stopped thinking of Malcolm as any type of relation. The man had sent gifts at birthdays and Christmases over the years, but Henry didn't really know him. He'd always been a sort of Dr. Who character that came in and out of his life with no real notice.

But Henry felt the need to know more about him now. Malcolm held the key to any future success his team would have because of the will. His BlackBerry rang and he glanced at the screen. Henry had a firm policy of not talking on his cell phone when he was out with another person.

Alonzo, one of the men he paid for tips on new bands, sent a text message that he had a group that Henry should check out playing later in the evening at a club a few blocks from where they were. Henry noted it.

He wasn't one for letting any leads slip by him. Maybe that was why he hadn't had a problem transitioning from rugby player to entrepreneur back when he'd first retired.

He glanced up as Astrid was walking toward him and simply watched her. She moved like many women did when they knew a man was watching. Her hips swayed languidly with each step and her arms moved by her sides.

"You're staring at me, boss man."

"You're a very pretty girl, Astrid."

She tipped her head to the side. "Thanks, I think."

"You think?"

"Is it a genuine compliment, or are you just buttering me up for some nasty assignment?" she asked.

He shook his head as he stood. He put his hand on the small of her back and directed her out of the restaurant. He knew she didn't need his hand on her to figure out which way to go, but he wanted to touch her. There was something ... almost irresistible about her.

"It was genuine. If I ask you to do a task you find distasteful it won't be hidden in between something pleasant."

She paused and glanced back at him. He stopped, and their faces were very close together. "Promise?"

"I promise," he said. Before he could say anything else, a flashbulb blinded him. He turned to face the cameraman, but the person was retreating.

They met Roger McMillan, a friend of Henry's, at the first club they entered. The place was crowded, as was to be expected, but they were immediately ushered to a VIP area cordoned off by velvet ropes.

Roger shook her hand and said something to her, but she couldn't hear him over the music. She nodded and would have excused herself but Henry grabbed her hand and led them to a table in the back.

It was a little quieter and Roger introduced himself again.

"Astrid Taylor," she said.

"She's my assistant. You will be calling her every morning by ten with any new groups you've identified."

"Got it. There's not much going on here tonight. But the deejay has a tip for us on a hot new group. Once he takes a break, he's going to come and meet us."

"Sounds good," Henry said.

"I'm going to make the rounds, see if there are any artists here tonight that you should meet," Roger said.

He excused himself and left the table. Astrid realized that Henry wasn't going to ease into his new job but had already hit the ground running. Unlike Daniel, he knew how to delegate. Henry wasn't all about himself.

"Why are you watching me like that?" he asked.

"You aren't going to follow Roger or send me after him?"

"Why should I? He knows what's expected of him and he's never let me down."

She shook her head. "That kind of attitude is different."

Henry nodded. "Everything I need to know about life I learned on a rugby pitch."

"Truly?"

"Indeed. The first thing I learned is that if you don't trust your teammates then you don't trust yourself. You can't be everywhere. So you must surround yourself with like-minded people."

"So many people in this business are ... elbows out. You know, always trying to shove themselves to the front of the line. When I worked for Daniel and Mo Rollins there was always a list of calls to be made just to make sure that people were doing what they were supposed to do."

Henry leaned in closer. "Is that one of the reasons why you left?"

"No. It isn't," Astrid said.

Henry put his arm around her shoulder and drew her back against the banquette. "I can't be successful until I know every member of my team—their strengths and their weaknesses."

"I don't have any weaknesses from my past that you need to worry about, Henry. I'm telling you everything you need to know about me."

Henry stroked one finger down the side of her face and she shivered. She wanted to rebuild her life and she couldn't do that if she was lusting after him.

"Let me be the judge of that," he said.

It took just those few words to convince her that he wasn't the easygoing guy he wanted the world to think he was. Henry Devonshire was a man used to getting his way. And right now that meant he was going to try to uncover her secrets.

Her secrets.

She had so many. And she knew there was no way in hell that she was going to trust Henry Devonshire with them. Men had let her down. Not her dad. No, her pop was a stand-up sort of guy. But the men—man—she'd met since she'd left home ... Daniel Martin had broken her ability to trust. He had shown her that not all men rewarded her trust in them.

"Not just yet," she said.

He nodded and sank back into his own chair. "You don't trust me."

"I don't know you," she said. That was one lesson she had learned. Not everyone she met had the same feelings of loyalty toward their friends that she did. And until she really had Henry's measure as a man, she wasn't about to trust him.

When she'd first started her affair with Daniel, she'd known it was risky to be involved with her boss, but the thrill of falling in love with someone as dynamic as Daniel had offset that. More than that, she'd also had her belief that Daniel was falling for her. And that made the risk more manageable—only after she found herself dumped by Daniel and pregnant with his child did she realize that her sense of loyalty was different than his.

"Point conceded," Henry said. "What do you think of this deejay?"

"He's okay," she said. "His sound is very funky and modern, but there's nothing to make him stand out from any of the other clubs."

"I agree. He's just one of the crowd, but he does have a good ear. We're looking for artists who can stand out in the crowd whether they are loved or hated, as long as they are noticed. I'm going to chat with him and see if he has any tips for me."

It was twenty minutes later when they left for a club in Notting Hill. Cherry Jam had a New York City feel to it. She saw two mates from her old clubbing days, and Henry nodded her off as he was dragged into a rugby conversation with Stan Stubbing, a sports reporter for the *Guardian*.

Molly and Maggie Jones were sisters who were only eleven months apart. Maggie, the older of the two, was actually Astrid's age.

"Astrid! What are you doing here?"

"Working! I'm here to check out the bands."

"I thought you'd stopped working for that record producer," Molly said.

Astrid swallowed. She had become used to the questions about her leaving Mo's organization, but she'd never really figured out a good answer. "I just started a new job with Everest Records."

"Which explains why you are here with Henry Devonshire. He is one cute guy."

"He's my boss," Astrid said.

"He can still be cute," Maggie pointed out.

"True. What are you drinking?" she asked her friends.

"Pomegranate martini. Want one?"

"I'd love one," Astrid said.

Molly went to the bar to get her one, and she and Maggie looked for a place to sit but the club was packed and the long, low tables were all full.

She glanced at the VIP area, where Henry had a table with Roger and a woman who looked familiar. He waved her over as soon he glanced up.

"Go on," Maggie said.

"You can come with me. Henry won't mind."

"All right then. Here's Molly with your drink," Maggie said.

Henry was seated at the head of the U-shaped booth and Roger sat on one side. Astrid slid in next to the woman, Molly followed her and Maggie sat next to Roger.

"Astrid, this is Steph Cordo. Steph, this is my assistant Astrid."

Astrid shook the other woman's hand. She was older than Astrid expected her to be. Most pop singers seemed to be sixteen these days, but Steph was at least twenty-five. Her eyes said she'd experienced a lot of life.

"Nice to meet you."

"You, as well," Steph said.

"These are my friends Maggie and Molly Jones," she said to the table.

Once everyone was introduced, Roger and Henry went back to discussing the music business and Astrid turned to Steph.

"Tomorrow we're going to have a lot for you to do. Did Henry mention that to you?"

“Yes. He also said you’d be setting up an appearance at the Everest Mega Store.”

“I will? I mean, of course I will. We can talk about that tomorrow. When is the best time to reach you?”

“Anytime except the afternoon. That’s when I sleep.”

Maggie laughed. “I wish I had that schedule.”

Steph flushed a little. “I’ve always been a night owl, and my mum’s a nurse. She used to work the overnight shift when I was growing up.... I guess I developed the habit early of staying up to talk to her.”

“My dad worked nights for a while before he bought his own cabs. We used to have breakfast every morning before school,” Astrid said.

Her dad had been a cab driver while she was growing up. He still owned a cab but had hired another man to drive it when his health had started to fail. Her mum had been a stay-at-home mum while she and Bethann were in primary school, then she’d gone back to teaching.

“Me, too. My mates were always having dinner with their folks, but for us it was breakfast.”

“Us, too. When my dad got sick, that was the one tradition we kept to even when he was in hospital—Bethann and I would make sure we stopped by at breakfast time.”

“What was your dad in hospital for?”

“Diabetes,” Astrid said. “He’s had it for most of his life, but he hates to eat right.”

“My mum would have given him hell if he’d been one of her clients. She is adamant that you can’t neglect your health, and I’ve picked up a few of her healthy habits,” Steph said.

“Me, too. I think because my dad’s health has always been so bad I’m really aware of what I’m eating and the effect it has on my body. I don’t want to end up like him if I can help it.”

“Is he bad?” Steph asked.

“Wheelchair bound,” Astrid said.

“How has your family handled that?”

“My sister and I take turns going down and helping our mum out. And we paid to have parts of the house converted so he could use his wheelchair in it. The hallways were so small.”

“I know what you mean. My mum is always saying this country is behind the times with awareness for the disabled.”

“The thing is, if my dad had been better about eating right he might not have needed the wheelchair. I didn’t mean to say that he could have helped it—”

“I know what you mean,” Steph said. “You just want to prevent that from happening to you if at all possible.”

“Exactly. I just want to live a normal life.”

“I’ve always been baffled by the words *normal schedule*. No one really has one. But I think we find ‘normal’ for ourselves,” Steph said.

“Is Astrid keeping you entertained?” Henry asked.

“Very much. I like her. She’s not like the other people who I’ve talked to in this industry.”

“In what way?” Henry asked.

“She’s real people,” Steph said.

Astrid smiled and realized that she could be friends with this woman. Something she’d sort of picked up from Steph’s chart-topping song “My World.”

“It’s going to be nice working with you,” Astrid said.

“I think so, too,” Steph said.

The conversation drifted in another direction and Steph turned to talk to Henry. Astrid chatted a bit with Maggie before the other woman and her sister had to leave. She watched them go, regretting that she’d shut herself off from her old life when she’d lost her last job. Being pregnant and having the complications she’d had had put an end to her nightlife. And then the scandal and rumors about her firing and her relationship with Daniel had made her want to hide.

And she had, by retreating to her home and not talking to friends.

The need to run and hide from everyone meant that she'd been missing out on a part of herself. She vowed never to do that again.

"Sorry, Astrid, but could you let me out?" Steph asked.

"Certainly." Astrid scooted out of the booth until Steph left and then sat back down.

"Pretty good evening so far. I think you have convinced Steph to sign with Everest Records. She was afraid that we'd be all corporate and not 'get' her music."

"Of course we won't be. I like her. I wasn't trying to convince her of anything."

"I know, that's why it worked. I think you are going to be an asset to my team," Henry said.

Astrid smiled and felt a flush that came with knowing she'd done a good job. That was it, she told herself. It had nothing to do with the fact that Henry had leaned in close to her and had his arm around her shoulder.

"I want to hit one more club before calling it a night," Henry said. "You up for that?"

She thought about her after-Daniel routine—evening television programs followed by a cup of chamomile tea and bed by eleven. For the first time since she'd lost her baby she felt alive. Really alive.

"Yes, I am."

"Good. Let's go," Henry said.

They talked a little more about what he wanted on their way to the next club, and Astrid was careful to listen to what he said. Throughout the rest of the evening he didn't push anymore to find out why she'd left Mo Rollins's organization, and she was glad of it.

She knew, though, that it was a temporary reprieve. Henry was going to get the answers to his questions. He was simply biding his time and letting her get to the point where she was finally comfortable.

She thought she'd have weeks to get to the point where she'd casually mention Daniel and the fact that over the eighteen months she worked for him their relationship had progressed from professional to personal, but that all changed when they left their third club of the evening and she stepped out into the night air and nearly collided with a tall, broad-shouldered man.

"Sorry," she said, glancing up into eyes that were very familiar.

"Astrid? What are you doing here?" Daniel asked.

"Working," she said.

"For me," Henry said, stepping behind her and putting his arm on her elbow as he drew her away from Daniel.

Four

Henry didn't like the way the other man was looking at Astrid. It was more than the way an ex-boss should. Over the course of the day he'd started thinking of her as his. Not in a sexual way ... well, not completely in a sexual way. And he could tell from the frozen expression on her face that this man wasn't a friend of hers.

"Henry Devonshire," Henry said, offering his hand to the man.

"Daniel Martin."

Suddenly a lot of things fell into place. Astrid's old boss was more than her boss. No wonder she'd been reluctant to talk about him.

"I've heard a lot about you."

"You, as well. Steph Cordo was quite a coup for you. A lot of producers are envious they didn't get the drop on you."

Henry smiled affably. His time in the spotlight taught him how to conceal what he really felt about others. And he didn't like the brash American Daniel. He rubbed Henry the wrong way.

"Henry's got an eye for talent."

"Let's hope he can also spot the slackers," Daniel said.

Astrid flinched and drew her handbag closer to her body. "I've always known how to build winning teams. There's our car. Good evening, Daniel."

Daniel nodded, and Henry led Astrid to the valet stand where his car waited. She was eerily silent for someone he'd come to expect to be sassy and spunky. Was the cheeky girl he'd come to know just a façade, and was this introspective woman the real Astrid?

"Daniel was the reason you left your last job," Henry said.

"It was attendance, like my record stated. I know that Daniel wouldn't have given me a recommendation."

"He didn't."

"Figures."

"How long were the two of you involved?" Henry asked.

"Why do you think we were?"

Henry gave her a shrewd look. "Ex-lovers make everyone react differently than ex-bosses. So ... how long were you two involved?"

"Too long," Astrid said. "I ... I'm not normally like that. I really thought that Daniel was a different man."

Henry sensed that about Astrid. She was funny and outgoing, but he had noticed earlier in the evening that she kept a barrier between herself and others. He'd recognized that trait mainly because he always did the same.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Henry asked.

She shook her head and clenched her hands tightly on her lap. He knew that she was trying to control her reaction to seeing her ex-lover.

Henry said nothing, just kept driving. He didn't know where Astrid lived, and he didn't want to interrupt her in the middle of whatever she was going to say.

"I always thought ... Well, that hardly matters. Where are we going now?" she asked.

"Home. But I'll need your address."

"You can drop me at the nearest Underground."

"No, I can't. They've stopped running at this hour."

She glanced at her watch and then shook her head again. "You're right. I live in Woking."

He put her address into his Sat Nav system and then followed the directions of Mr. T's voice. As he expected, Astrid laughed a little the first time the recorded voice told him to "turn around, fool."

"I can't believe you have that rude voice on your Sat Nav."

"It's Mr. T. That's his persona—big tough guy."

"I don't get it. But then Americans are very different, aren't they?"

"Some. They don't get rugby, which makes no sense at all to me."

She smiled again, and he felt good for having made her smile. "I guess they are just daft."

"Must be. Do you follow rugby?" he asked.

"Some," she said, blushing the slightest bit. He could only see the rise in color as he braked to a stop for the traffic light. "I used to when I was younger."

"Which teams?"

"England, of course, in the 6 Nations."

"Have you been to any games?" he asked.

"A few. I used to be really into going to the games at Madejski Stadium to watch the London Irish play."

"Why'd you stop?" he asked. His old team was still a contender.

"My dad got too sick to go. And it was always something I did with him."

"Your family must be very close," he said.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"You had lunch with your sister, went to games with your dad."

She shrugged. Something he noticed she did a lot when she was evading answering a question.

"I suppose we are. What about you? Your mum is Tiffany Malone. That had to be exciting."

"She's still my mum," he said. "We're quite close, actually. She loves being a mum and smothers my brothers and I with her mothering."

Astrid smiled again. "Are you a bit of a mummy's lad?"

"What do you think?"

She tipped her head to the side as she studied him and, having lightened her mood, he felt as if he was seeing the return of Astrid. Not that tight-lipped stranger whom Daniel Martin had evoked.

"I think you are a man who knows very much what he wants and probably doesn't look to anyone for approval."

He nodded. "Damn straight. Now which place is yours?"

She pointed to a modern block of flats and he pulled into the parking lot. She reached for her door as he turned off the car. He got out and met her as she exited the car. It had started to drizzle on the drive, and the rain made her hair curl.

She stared up at him for a minute, chewing on her lower lip. "Thank you for the ride home. And for ... well for being so nice about everything. You made seeing Daniel again bearable for me."

"You're welcome," he said. He cupped her elbow and led her to the entrance of the building.

"Well, good night, then," she said.

"Good night, Astrid," he said. But instead of doing the smart thing and letting her enter her building, he touched the side of her face and lowered his head to kiss her.

Astrid leaned up into Henry's kiss. He didn't put his arm around her, but kept one hand on her face. His lips rubbed lightly over hers, and she stood on tiptoe to get closer to him. His lips were soft and provoked a slow burn.

The reaction of his mouth on hers sent tingles down her body and she opened her mouth on a sigh. She tasted the minty crispness of his breath before his tongue brushed over hers. Forgetting everything, she felt only his mouth on hers.

The hand on her face slid to the nape of her neck, and he held her firmly as he took complete control of their kiss.

She couldn't think.

She didn't want to. She'd watched Henry all day and night wondering what it would be like to be in his embrace, and now she knew. It was intense.

He smelled earthy and masculine. His cologne was expensive and crisp—she suspected it was custom-blended just for him. She closed her eyes to focus her senses in the experience.

He pulled back, and she opened her eyes to see him staring down at her. He said nothing but rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip and then stepped away from her.

“Good night, then,” he said.

She watched him walk back to his car and realized she was still standing there like a ninny. She unlocked the lobby door to her flat building and walked in without looking back at him.

Danger loomed—real danger of falling for Henry Devonshire. A man who would never see her any differently than Daniel had. How could he? His mother was a pop star, his father was a billionaire entrepreneur and she was the daughter of a schoolteacher and a taxi driver.

When was she going to learn?

Why did she have a weakness for men who were ...

“Not good for me,” she said out loud.

She kicked off her shoes as she entered and dropped her keys on the kitchen counter. It took her fifteen minutes to get ready for bed, but once she was there she couldn't sleep. She just kept reliving, not the encounter with Daniel, which she'd expected, but the kiss with Henry.

She'd never been kissed like that before. It had been too intense. Her vows to herself about not getting involved with men she worked with melted away.

She drifted off to sleep and woke early for work. She dressed in an ultraprofessional suit that she'd worn to her interview with Malcolm Devonshire's assistant Edmond. That suit was her armor when she needed to be professional. Bethann called, but Astrid let it go to voice mail because Bethann could always tell when something was going on in Astrid's life. Her older sister had known her affair with Daniel had gone wrong just from the way Astrid had said hello.

The train was busy, but that was normal for the morning. She knew she was going to have to figure out an alternate way to handle her commute once she started going out at night with Henry. She tried to fill her mind with to-do lists and other meaningless tasks, but the one thought that kept circling around was what would happen when she saw Henry.

How was he going to treat her today?

Her mobile rang again and she hit the quiet button. The part of the train she was on was a quiet zone, so she couldn't talk to Bethann even if she wanted to. A minute later she received an instant message on her Smartphone. They each had a BlackBerry so could use the Messenger on that.

Bethann: Stop ignoring my calls.

Astrid: I'm on the train, Bethann. I can't talk just now.

Bethann: Where were you last night?

Astrid: Working.

Bethann: I left you a voice mail at home ... I'm worried about you. I think you should have taken a job in my office.

Astrid hadn't even seriously considered working with her sister at the law office where Bethann was a solicitor. She loved Bethann, but the other woman was demanding and very bossy. If they worked together, Astrid was afraid she'd lose it and say something that would hurt her sister's feelings.

Astrid: I like working in the music industry. My stop's next. Daniel contacted me and threatened to tell Henry awful things about me.

Bethann: I'm going to contact his office today. We filed a wrongful termination.

Astrid: I know but the fact that I settled makes it seem like there was something untoward between us.

Bethann: There was.

Astrid: Stop being a cow about that. I need you to just tell me everything's going to be okay and the one mistake I made falling for that man isn't going to ruin the rest of my life.

Bethann: Love, don't say things like that. You are on a better track now. Sorry for being bossy.

Astrid: No problem. Sorry for getting all emotional.

Bethann: Have a good day, sis.

Astrid: You too. TTYL.

She entered her office to find three e-mails from Henry, the last one saying he'd be in the office later this morning.

She stashed her handbag and started to work. Tried to get into the flow of the office. There were a couple of coworkers that she'd started being friendly with in the kitchen area where the coffeepot was kept, but this morning she kept to herself. Stayed at her desk and just worked.

She had made mistakes with Daniel. At first their relationship had been like this one with Henry, and now she was afraid of repeating those same mistakes. She refused to let that happen.

Just because they spent every eight hours together in the office and then most evenings together didn't mean they were growing closer. She had to remember he'd been happy last night because she'd helped convince Steph to sign with Everest Records.

Daniel had been happy with her too, and then she'd started to fall for him. Or rather let him seduce her. She couldn't make that mistake again. Henry was her boss and unless she wanted to go back to Farnham with her tail tucked between her legs she needed to make this job work.

She wasn't going to have that fairy tale happily-ever-after with Henry even if he was different from Daniel. She had to remember that she wasn't like other women—not anymore—and she didn't have the option of being a wife and mother to fall back on. For her it was a career or nothing.

She needed to keep to her vow. She needed to remember that if she had to leave *this* job, her only option might be working for her sister.

She didn't want to have to start over yet again. The only way she was going to keep this job was to be firm with herself and focus on doing the best she could.

She almost believed herself that she could do it, she could keep her vow—until Henry walked through the door.

“Morning, Astrid. Have you got any messages for me?”

She looked up into his bright blue eyes and forgot what he'd asked. All she could remember was the way his shoulders had felt under her hands last night. The softness of those firm lips of his against hers. And the way he'd twisted his fingers in the back of her hair.

“Astrid?”

“Yes, Henry.”

“Messages?” he asked.

She handed him the messages and realized she'd done it again. Allowed her crush to interfere with her professional career.

Henry had taken one look at the button-down suit that Astrid had on and realized that kissing her last night had been a mistake. He knew he had to retreat. Had to give her room to regain the confidence she'd had the day before. He should have known that a woman who'd been badly burned by an office affair wouldn't want to jump into another one with her new boss.

But the moonlight had been too entrancing.... Hell, the moonlight had absolutely nothing to do with why he had kissed her. It had been Astrid—her lips, her body and her sexy smile that had tempted him. That and the fact that he didn't like that Daniel Martin had touched her. That the other man had at one time claimed Astrid as his own.

He was first and foremost a competitor. The need to win had been burned into the fabric of his being at a very young age. His mother had often blamed Malcolm for the fact that he was so competitive, but she was just as aggressive when it came to her career.

There was a rap on his door.

“Come in.”

“Sir, I mean, Henry. Davis from accounting is here to see you.”

“Close the door, Astrid,” Henry said.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “Yes?”

“Does he have an appointment?”

“No. But he says its urgent. You do have ten minutes if you wanted to see him. Just a reminder—Steph Cordo is due here in twenty minutes and I know you want to be available then.”

He smiled to himself. She was very efficient and the best assistant he’d ever had. Okay, the only one, but she was still good.

“Thank you. When Steph gets here, escort her to the conference room. We’ll bring in everyone she needs to talk to. Also, Steven will be stopping by toward the end of the hour with her.”

“Steven?”

“My half brother. We are going to set up an in-store performance for Steph at the Everest Mega Store located in Leicester Square.”

“Sounds good. Do you want me to interrupt if Davis isn’t out of here in ten minutes?”

“That’d be great.”

She turned to leave, and though he was trying to keep his mind on business, he couldn’t help but notice the way her slim-fitting skirt hugged the curves of her backside.

“Henry?”

She paused in the doorway. “After Steph’s appointment, I’d like five minutes of your time.”

“What for?”

“We can speak later. I don’t want to mess up your schedule.”

“Davis can wait. Tell him I’ll have time tomorrow morning and then come back in here.”

“Really—”

“I’ve made my mind up.”

She left without another word. It was good to be the boss. Since he’d earned the top spot on the team and here at the office, he got things his way. Something that Henry freely admitted he liked.

She reentered his office less than a minute later, closing the door behind her, but remaining in the doorway.

“Sit down.”

She did.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Last night.”

“What about it?”

She took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. His respect for her rose a notch.

“I like you, Henry. But this job ... I’m aware that this is probably my last chance to make a go at the music industry. And I don’t want to mess this up.”

“Why would last night have anything to do with that?” he asked. “I’m not your last boss. If I kiss you, I’m not going to fire you.”

She glanced down at her lap where her fingers were tightly laced together. “I wasn’t fired due to our affair. Daniel kept me on after things ended. I don’t want you to get the wrong impression of Daniel.”

Henry didn’t like her defending the other man. That reaction made little sense to him so he ignored the source. “Why then?”

“I was sick. And I did take a lot of time off from work. That was what made him sack me.”

“Did you find it difficult to work with him after your affair ended?” he asked. Then realized he was prying into very personal areas. He could work with Astrid, kiss her and whatnot, without knowing any of the details of her past. Except he wanted to know more.

“No. It was something else entirely. But I like you and I really like this job. I don’t want to make another decision based on lust and end up regretting it.”

Henry leaned back in his chair. “So you lust after me?”

“Henry, please, I’m trying to be serious.”

“Sorry, Astrid, but you brought up sex and I’m a guy. That means my mind is going to automatically shut down.”

She smiled. “You are more than some sex-crazed maniac. That’s why I’m talking to you. I know you want to beat your half brothers and I think we have a chance of doing that, but only if we both concentrate on business.”

“This is all in my best interest?” Henry asked.

“Well, it’s not going to be bad for me, either,” she admitted.

His respect for Astrid rose even more. And he realized she wasn’t the kind of woman he’d always been attracted to. She was so forthright. She wasn’t just out for herself and what she could get.

That was more refreshing than he would have imagined.

“I just want us both to be successful,” she said.

He stood up and walked around to the front of his desk, leaning back against it so that he faced her. “Thank you, Astrid. I will do my best to keep my baser instincts in check, but I’m not sure I’ll be successful.”

“I’m going to keep dressing in my ultraprofessional suits,” she said.

He laughed. It wasn’t the clothing or her sexy body that was making him want her, though they definitely played a part. It was the woman she was, but he doubted telling her would help either of them.

It was a late night almost three weeks into her tenure at Everest Records. She’d been on the phone with a number of radio stations throughout the U.K. and Europe to make sure that everyone had received the packages she’d sent out about Steph.

Henry had been out doing his nightly club thing, and she was sitting in the office by herself.

“Another late night?”

She looked up to see him standing in the doorway. “My boss can be a slave driver.” She smiled.

“Really? I thought I was easing up a bit. Giving you room to grow and all that.”

“Is that what you are trying to do?”

“I think so. You said that you wanted a career in music so I’ve been introducing you to all the departments—A & R, marketing.

“It has been smashing,” she said.

“Truly?”

“Well, it’s different than what I did for Daniel. I mean, for him I was just his assistant, but you are giving me my own responsibilities. I’m enjoying it.”

Henry nodded. “Good. Then maybe you can start to relax here at the office.”

“I already have,” she said. It surprised her. She’d kept her guard up and tried not to see Henry as anything other than her boss. But he was a stand-up guy behind the celebrity profile. She fielded a dozen questions a day from magazines and newspaper reporters about where he was going to be. Some of the information she leaked because Henry wanted some extra coverage for a group or for his friends.

“Good,” he said again, leaving her to go into his office. She just sat there and tried not to think too much about the fact that he was treating her like an employee and he hadn’t tried to kiss her once since that night at her flat. Which was perfect, really, since she wasn’t interested in him as a man. At least that’s what she kept telling herself.

Astrid borrowed her sister’s car for the evening and left it parked near Waterloo Station so she could have Henry drop her off there if she needed to. She didn’t want to risk having him at her flat again. They were hitting another string of clubs tonight. It had been four weeks since she’d talked to him in his office. For the most part he kept his hands to himself. But his gaze often lingered on her lips or her figure.

And she found herself wishing she’d kept her mouth shut. She wanted to feel his arms around her. Each night in her dreams she relived that brief kiss he’d given her at her door. She wasn’t going

to allow herself to pine for him, but a part of her—the part that she sometimes thought would never come to her senses—longed for Henry.

She took the Underground to Covent Garden and walked to Bungalow 8. The exclusive club had been known to turn away even celebs, so she was a little intimidated to approach the bouncer.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m meeting Henry Devonshire,” she said. “I’m Astrid Taylor.”

“Of course, Ms. Taylor. He asked that you join him in the VIP area. The hostess will direct you once you are inside.”

The electronica music pulsed through her body as she followed the hostess to the VIP area. She should be getting used to so many late nights, but she wasn’t. And when she approached Henry’s table, she noticed that it was full of people. She’d realized quickly that part of Henry’s charm was his easygoing manner.

No wonder the bouncer had simply let her in. She was probably one of fifteen people who’d used Henry’s name to get in the door tonight.

He looked up when she approached and gave her a half smile. He gestured for her to have a seat at the end of his table and she sat down next to a man she’d seen on TV and Lonnie from their office. She chatted with the TV guy—“call me Alan”—until he left with a group of three women. Henry waved her down to a seat next to him.

“Have you been listening to this group?”

“Hard not to,” she said. Since the music even in the VIP section was blaringly loud, it made conversation impossible.

“What do you think of it?”

She turned her head toward the sound and closed her eyes. One of the first things she’d realized about good music was that it had the power to entrance a person. Make someone forget about the problems of everyday life. The band didn’t spark that feeling.

“It’s nice.”

“But not great,” Henry said.

“Exactly. They are a good band and I bet they’d do well for one album, but I don’t think they have the kind of sound that would sustain a lasting career,” she said.

“Good. I like your instincts.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“The next band is the one that Roger recommended to me. I think you’ll like them.”

“Why?” she asked. She wanted to know what Henry thought she’d like and why. Did he really know her? It had only been a few weeks, though she’d come to know him pretty well since they’d spent so much time together?

“Because they have a nice sound with a pop groove but there’s something retro about their lyrics. They talk about real emotions, which I’ve noticed you like as I’ve been listening to the tapes of the bands you want me to sign.”

“I noticed you noticing,” she said. Over the past two weeks he had paid a lot of attention to her at work, asking her opinions on bands, giving her decision-making power on booking groups for radio tours and whatnot. Mostly he’s treated her like a respected peer, and that was all she’d needed.

“Good. I wanted you to see that I’m not like Daniel,” Henry said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I’m going to kiss you again, Astrid, and this time I don’t want you to run.”

She felt foolish when he said it like that. But then she was human, she thought. And resisting temptation, especially the type that he offered, was too hard.

“I’m not going to make another foolish mistake,” she said, not sure if she meant the words for Henry or for herself.

“Good,” he said. He reached under the table and took her hand in his. His big hand completely engulfed hers. They announced the band XSU. Sounded like some American university band and the guys looked the part.

In their denim jeans and faded vintage T-shirts they looked as though they were meant to be singing to university crowds instead of this very upscale and trendy club in London.

They introduced their first song and the music was ... sex-disco. A pulsing beat that made her want to get up and dance. She was tapping her feet and noticed that Henry was moving to the beat, as well. The dance floor, which had been crowded before now, seemed to be a single solid wave of dancing bodies.

Henry used his grip on her hand to tug her to her feet. They were in the middle of the swaying crowd. Henry’s body brushed hers often as they danced, each brush reminding her that she’d done a poor job of keeping the distance she’d wanted between them.

She tried to be stiff, tried to keep a part of herself locked away but it was impossible. She wanted Henry. And this music reminded her that life was meant to be lived, not hidden away from.

She stopped thinking she had to be professional and just relaxed, allowing herself to just be herself. And that moment changed her. She looked into Henry’s impossibly blue eyes and saw more than she’d thought to see.

In taking the measure of the man, she knew that no matter what happened between them, she’d never regret the time they spent together.

Five

Something had changed in Astrid when XSU had started playing. She seemed to sparkle with life as she moved on the dance floor, and Henry wanted to be the only one who basked in that glow.

He kept one hand on her hip as they danced. Her body brushed against his, teasing him with each rhythmic move she made. He wanted more than those fleeting touches. He wanted her breasts pressed solidly against his chest, his hands holding her hips and that tempting mouth of hers under his.

The music stopped, but he scarcely noticed. The crowd applauded, and in the back of his mind Henry realized that he'd found the first group he'd sign to the Everest Records label, and he'd use a similar path to the one he developed with Steph Cordo. But he'd also found something else, he thought.

Astrid watched him with those big brown eyes of hers, and he leaned in and kissed her. He didn't think about consequences or warnings. Didn't think about winning or business. Just thought that this woman was temptation incarnate and he was tired of denying himself.

He lingered over her mouth. The last three weeks had been too long as far as his body was concerned. Blood flowed heavier through his veins. Her hands came to his shoulders, anchoring her as she rose on tiptoe to deepen their kiss.

The crowd swayed around them as the band moved on to the next song, but Henry felt the world narrow until he and Astrid were alone.

She tasted tangy and sweet and of something that was uniquely Astrid. There was an energy between them, and when he lifted his head she tunneled her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck and brought their mouths together again.

She sighed as he kissed her. "I've been dying for your kiss."

He took her hand and led her off the dance floor. "Have you?"

She nodded.

"I'm tired of pretending that I don't want you, but that doesn't mean I think this is right. You already guessed that my relationship with Daniel complicated my last job. I can't afford to let that happen again."

"What can I say to change your mind?" Henry asked.

"I'm not sure. I just ... I'm not saying I don't want you, just that I'm not sure it's wise for me to get involved with you, Henry."

"We will figure it out," Henry said. "I want to go talk to the band. Want to come with me?"

She nodded.

He held on to her hand and he no longer felt that she was just his assistant. Now he knew she was his. And he liked that. He needed to make love to her before he'd really feel she was his.

The band had a small group of women hanging around them as he approached. Henry used his celebrity to get closer to the band. He approached the black-shirted bouncer protecting the backstage area, who was turning away scantily clad women and overzealous fans.

"I'm Henry Devonshire, and I'd like to speak to the band."

"Henry Devonshire. I saw you score a converted try in the last minute of the London-Irish game—your last one."

"That was a great game. Stan got that penalty and I thought we were going to lose."

"But you didn't. You were brilliant."

"Thanks," Henry said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let us back to see that band."

"Sure thing, mate." The bouncer stepped aside and let them through.

"Henry Devonshire," he said as he approached the lead singer.

"Angus McNeil," the young man said, shaking Henry's hand.

"I like the sound of your group."

“Thanks, man. We’ve been experimenting with a lot of different influences and I’m not sure we have it right yet.”

“I’d like to talk to you a little more about that. I’m in charge of Everest Records now,” Henry said. “Do you guys have a manager?”

“Yes. B&B Management.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” Henry said. He glanced over at Astrid to see if she were familiar with the company, but she shook her head.

“It’s actually my older brother and one of his mates,” Angus said a little sheepishly. “No one wanted to talk to us unless we had a big deal going. So Bryan went to the library and got a few books.... Ah, man, you don’t want to hear all that, do you?”

“Yes, we do, Angus,” Astrid said, stepping forward. “At Everest Groups, we like to know everything about the artists we sign.”

“That’s why we are here,” Henry said. “Do you have another set or can you guys come with me to talk?”

The other band members had wandered over to their group and milled about exchanging glances. Henry decided he should step away and let them talk.

“Here’s my card. I’m going to be out in the club for another hour or so. If you have time to talk tonight, great, if not, no problem. Call tomorrow and we will set up something.”

He led Astrid back to the VIP area, but he was restless and didn’t want to sit and wait. He ordered drinks for both of them and Astrid put her hand on his.

“I can feel the energy crackling around you. What are you thinking about?”

Henry didn’t like to share his most intimate thoughts so he kept silent until he realized that Astrid would give him the distraction he needed. “That you still haven’t told me your secrets.”

“Well, that will have to wait for another time. A noisy nightclub is no place for an intimate conversation.”

“I disagree. This is the perfect place. There’s a feel of anonymity to being here. The background noise keeps others from hearing.”

She tipped her head to the side and then leaned forward so that their noses almost touched. “It wouldn’t keep you from hearing.”

He arched one eyebrow at her. “Good. Tell me your secrets, Astrid.”

She shook her head. “Not unless you tell me yours. Not the stuff I can read in *Hello!*, but the real Henry’s secrets. Why are you so restless right now?”

Henry didn’t want to share that with her. He was reluctant to let anyone know about the impulses that had always driven him—the need for immediacy in every area of his life.

Astrid was still almost high on her new sense of self. She had always let the men in her life ... well, Daniel, set the tone and the pace of their relationship. And she knew if she was going to have any chance at making any kind of relationship with Henry work, she needed to change.

Instead of focusing on hiding her own secrets, she wanted to know about his. What had shaped Henry into the man he was today?

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and drew her closer to him. “I’m not restless, love. I want to be alone with you so we can finish what we started on the dance floor.”

She shivered as he spoke straight into her ear. The warmth of his breath against her neck sent electric pulses flooding through her body. She wanted him, too.

And that scared her. Lust she could deal with but this was more than lust. She liked Henry. Liked the man who was more than his press bio. And she was afraid to trust that gut-deep feeling about Henry. She thought he was different, but there was no guarantee any relationship between the two of them was going to last more than a few months.

“What’s that look for?” he asked her.

"I'm scared that I'm in over my head," she said in a moment of candor. She might regret it later, but if she'd learned anything it was not to pull her punches. There was no "safe-route" in any relationship.

"My first year as a professional rugby player I was constantly terrified. My stepdad was the coach and I knew that if I screwed up, he'd come down on me. And I played from a place of fear for the first three games, before one of the guys said to me, 'I heard you were good, but now it looks like that was all bullshit.'"

"That wasn't very nice."

Henry shrugged. "I was giving in to the pressure from every avenue, so I made a decision that I was going to play for myself. Not for Gordon or for the crowd. Just for myself."

"Did that work?" Astrid asked.

"Yes, it did. My playing started improving and eventually I was made captain."

"Good job," she said.

"I used that same theory off the pitch. I live my life on my terms."

"I'm trying to do the same, but there is always a fear—"

"Stop worrying, Astrid."

He glanced over her shoulder and stood to greet someone else—a tall dark-haired young man whose shaggy hair reached his shoulders.

"I'm Bryan Monroe. I represent XSU."

"Glad to meet you. This is Astrid, my assistant. Would you like to sit down and join us for a drink?"

"Love to."

Astrid sank back into her seat and just observed Henry doing his thing. People came and went from his table, which was the norm for Henry, but he kept his attention on everyone. He always had a glass of seltzer water on the table in front of him. She'd quickly realized that her boss didn't drink on these long nights out. And he had a work ethic that would put anyone to shame.

Daniel had often used other people to make things happen. She had observed him leaving clubs early with groupies while his underlings stayed and talked details. Every minute she spent with Henry made her like him a little more.

She started to get tired and fought to keep from yawning at about two in the morning. She signaled to Henry that she was going to leave.

"Wait for me," he said to her.

Thirty minutes later, they walked out of the club together. "I think we're going to get XSU."

"Definitely. Bryan sounded very encouraging. I'll follow up with him first thing tomorrow."

"I'll give you a ride home," Henry said.

"Not necessary. I drove Bethann's car today."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to take advantage of you. I appreciate the fact that you are always giving me a ride but it seemed important to have my own way home."

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because I always want to invite you up to my place and that's not a good idea, is it?"

Astrid didn't regret her candor. They both knew the attraction between them was growing. There was nothing they could do about it.

"I think inviting me up is a fine idea. Why haven't you?"

"Because you're my boss, Henry," she said. The night breeze was cool and a little crisp as she tipped her head back to stare up at the stars.

"Why is your name Henry?"

He laughed a soft sound. "It was my mum's dad's name. What about you, Astrid?"

“My mother got it from a book. Bethann was named after my mum’s mum and me ... I get a name from a book,” she said.

“What book?”

“Pippi *Longstocking*. The author was Astrid Lindgren. My mum said she wanted me to have that passion for life that Pippi always had.”

Astrid looked back over at Henry to find him watching her with that unreadable expression of his. She was talking too much, she knew, but she was tired. Physically of course, because her body had yet to adjust to the night owl hours, but also tired of keeping parts of herself from Henry. She wanted him to know the woman she was. Wanted him to look at her and see the real woman.

“I like that. Your mum sounds like she knew what she was doing when she named you,” Henry said.

Astrid wasn’t certain about that. A part of her had always felt as though she had to live a larger life than her sister. Bethann was driven and always made the right choices. She had achieved more and accomplished great things, as opposed to Astrid, who was always starting over.

“I’m not so sure. But I do like where I am right now,” she said.

Henry grabbed her hand, linking their fingers together as they walked down the street to where he’d parked his car.

“Have you ever thought about what you’d name your children?”

Astrid felt a sting of tears at his question. And turned away from him.

“Astrid?”

She shook her head. “Probably after my parents. You?”

“I’ve always thought I’d name a son after Jonny Wilkinson, the great rugby player.”

“Better hope your wife likes the sport,” she said. She tried to keep her tone light, but she knew that children was never going to be an easy topic for her.... How had they taken this track?

Henry didn’t want to talk about kids; he’d never really thought much about them other than when his mum had given birth to his two younger half brothers. But there was a tone in Astrid’s voice that made him believe he should pursue this line. There was something more to the way she had answered his throwaway question.

“What are your parents’ names?” he asked.

“Spencer and Mary,” she said. “I really don’t want to talk about this. I’m not even sure how we ended up on this topic.”

He unlocked the passenger door of his car and helped her inside. He walked around to the driver’s side and sat behind the wheel for a minute before starting it.

“My mum contemplated naming me Mick after Mick Jagger, but in the end she said she wanted to name me after the man who always loved her.”

“That’s sweet,” Astrid said. She had to wonder how hard it was on Henry growing up the way he had. “Why did you play rugby? Wouldn’t it have been easier for you to try to be a musician?”

Then she covered her mouth with one hand as a thought occurred to her. “Or can’t you sing?”

“I can sing,” Henry said. “Not very well, but I can sing.”

“So why not music?”

“I’m a stubborn cuss,” he said, starting the car. “I didn’t want anyone to say I had anything given to me. I started playing rugby when I was eight. I’d already grown up in the glare of my mum’s spotlight and the infamous circumstances surrounding my birth.... If I achieved anything I wanted it to be on my own terms.”

He pulled out and started driving toward Astrid’s car. “Where are you parked?”

“Near Waterloo,” she said, giving him directions to the location.

“You were very wise to make that choice so young,” she said. “Bethann is like that. She’s a solicitor. Always knew she wanted to be one.”

“What about you?”

"I always knew I wanted to live in London," she said with a little laugh. "I love the excitement of the city and being so close to everything."

"Why don't you live in town?"

"Well, Woking was all I could afford on my own and all my mates are married now. Anyways, that's why I have a flat in Woking."

"I meant how did you find your way to the music industry?" Henry pulled into the car park where she'd left her car.

"My car's in the second level," she said. "I took a job out of university as a receptionist. It was with Mo Rollins Group, and I just sort of worked my way up. The funny thing is the longer I worked there the more at home I felt."

"It's that green Ford Fusion."

He pulled up behind the car and she gathered her bag to get out. But he wasn't ready to say good-night just yet.

"And now you're working for me. Still like this industry?" he asked.

"After a night like tonight? You bet. I loved the raw sound of XSU and once you sign them it'll be exciting to watch their transformation into a solid band."

"I agree. I had thought of being a sports agent or a recruiter."

"Why didn't you? I remember that telly show you had a few years ago that featured child protégés of the sports world."

"You do? Did you watch it?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she admitted. "How did you get into doing that?"

"My mum knows all kinds of people in the entertainment industry and after my injury she started putting me in touch with them."

"She sounds like she's very helpful."

Henry laughed. "She's a meddler. I told her I was going to live off my investments and just party all the time. That motivated her to use every contact she had to get me in touch with someone who could put me to work."

"And she got her way, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did. So I had the show, and I was talking to my own agent from when I was with the London Irish, but it was a frustrating job and I didn't really enjoy it."

"Is that when you turned to music?"

"Yes. I had the contacts in this world," Henry said.

"And it gives you something in common with your mum."

"Yes, it does. Want to come back to my place for a nightcap?"

"Um ... what?"

"I don't want this night to end. I don't think you do either," he said.

She hesitated and then sighed. "No, I don't want it to end. But I have a busy day tomorrow."

"I know your boss."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of. It's hard to balance working together with a personal relationship."

"Is it? Everest Group has no policy against fraternization, so your job isn't in jeopardy at all."

"Will that still be true if I say I want to go home?" she asked.

"Of course it will be. I think you know me better than that," Henry said. "And if you don't, then going home is definitely what you should do."

She bit her lower lip. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I guess I'll see you at work tomorrow."

"Yeah," she said, climbing out of the car. He watched her walk to her vehicle, and she opened the door, tossing her purse inside before looking back at him.

"Do you really want to pursue a relationship with me?" she asked.

He nodded. He couldn't get her out of his mind and he was tired of trying. He was going to have Astrid Taylor if for no other reason than they might be able to work without the tension of wondering what they'd be like together.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Henry. I'm not sure sleeping with you is in my best interest."

"Well, when you put it that way, I'm not either," Henry said. He reached out and tugged on one of her curls. He didn't want her to say no to him, but he knew that she had a lot more at stake than he did. He was trying to go slowly with her, but he was used to just reaching out and taking what he wanted.

And damn the consequences.

"Come to my country home this weekend," he said. "We can ride horses and play rugby and get to know each other."

She shook her head. "I already have plans."

"Then invite me along," he said. A shy man never got what he wanted.

"It's with my family.... Still want to come?"

"Yes. What's the occasion?"

"My sister's birthday. My mum's having a dinner party for her."

Henry realized that Astrid thought she had taken a risk by inviting him. And he wasn't about to pass it up. "I'd love to."

"Good. I'll see you at work tomorrow, Henry. Thanks for the lift."

"You're welcome. Drive safely, Astrid."

She got in her car, and he backed up to let her leave in front of him. She was completely unlike any other woman he'd ever met and he was beginning to understand that was part of what attracted him to her.

Six

Astrid had had second, third and fourth thoughts about inviting Henry to her parents' house for Bethann's birthday, but she'd asked and he'd accepted, so there was no turning back now.

Henry hadn't been in the office the past two days so she hadn't seen him since she'd invited him. He'd sent her a text message the night before, asking what time to pick her up. Now she was standing in front of the mirror in her bedroom wishing that she'd turn into someone else. Someone who knew what she was doing with her life instead of a woman who just bumped along.

The bell rang and she sighed.

She walked through the flat and opened the door to find Henry standing there. He wore a striped button-down shirt with an open collar and a pair of dark trousers. He hadn't shaved but the light beard on his jaw made him look even sexier than he normally did.

"Come in," she said, stepping back so he could enter. "I have to grab my bag and then I'll be ready to go."

"Take your time," he said.

She went down the short hall to her bedroom and gathered her stuff as quickly as she could. When she came back Henry stood in front of the wall where she'd hung her family pictures.

"Is this Bethann?"

"Yes. When she passed her A levels. That's my parents' place, as well."

"Everyone looks happy," he said.

"We generally are," she said. She'd taken that happiness for granted. Thought that because she had a sunny outlook, her life would follow that path. But experience had taught her otherwise.

"Ready then?"

"Yes," he said, walking toward her. But instead of continuing on to the door, he stopped and pulled her into his arms.

He kissed her, and she shut her eyes, savoring that moment of closeness. A moment that passed all too quickly as Henry ended the kiss and then put his hand on the small of her back to lead her to the front door. He waited while she double-checked her lock and then they went downstairs.

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