

A romantic couple embracing in a bedroom. The man is shirtless and muscular, wearing dark pants. The woman is wearing a pink, backless dress. They are standing in front of a large window with sheer curtains, looking at each other. The scene is lit with soft, warm light.

IN BED WITH THE
BOSS

CHRISTINE RIMMER

The Cherish logo, featuring the word "Cherish" in a white, cursive font with a small trademark symbol, set against a dark background.

Cherish[™]



Christine Rimmer

In Bed with the Boss

Аннотация

Ready for business...and for pleasure!Single mother Shelly Winston was trouble! From the moment she accepted his job offer, Tom Holloway knew he was going to have trouble resisting his alluring assistant and her charming little boy. Shelly knew that falling for her boss was a business don't. Especially when Tom found out about the secret she'd been forced to keep.Someone was out to sabotage the burgeoning hotel empire. And it could have disastrous consequences for the future of two powerful dynasties – and her own future with the man she loved... Back in Business Romance outside the nine-to-five!

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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“Office romances are a bad idea. They never –”

“Stop.” Tom put his index finger against her lips.

“But I –”

“Shh. Listen. Are you listening?”

Shelly made a face at him. “Hit me with it.”

“I have examples.”

“Of?”

“Office romances that worked out great. Better than great. Let’s see...Jack Hanson and his wife, Samantha. Samantha and Jack were old business rivals. Then she came to work at Hanson Media – with Jack. And then there’s David Hanson, George Hanson’s brother. He actually married his secretary, Nina. Can you believe that?”

“OK, OK. I’ll modify my position.”

“You bet you will.”

“*Sometimes* office romances do work out. How’s that?”

“Better.”

She cleared her throat. “So. Are you going to...kiss me again?”

CHRISTINE RIMMER

came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she’d been everything, including an actress, a sales clerk and a waitress. Now that she’s finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job – she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine

is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves, who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oklahoma. Visit Christine at www.christinerimmer.com.

In Bed with the Boss

Christine Rimmer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Tom and Ed,
who never fail to comfort
and inspire.

Prologue

Two years ago...

It was *the* moment.

And Tom Holloway knew it.

Across the black granite boardroom table, Helen Taka-Hanson waited, her beautiful face composed, showing him nothing. Behind her, beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, the afternoon sun reflected off the tall buildings of North Michigan Avenue. Tom kept his gaze level, on Helen. But he knew what was out there: The Second City. The Magnificent Mile.

Chicago. Tom wanted it. *Needed* it, really. A fresh start in a new town. He would be chief financial officer of TAKA-Hanson's new hospitality division.

Which meant hotels. Contemporary luxury hotels on a grand scale. It was the biggest venture he'd tackled so far and it sounded good. Better than good.

And the job was his. Helen had already made the offer.

What he said next could blow it for him—more than likely *would* blow it for him. Which was why he'd left the crucial information off his résumé. His disgrace had happened so long ago, it was easily glossed over now.

But Tom had learned the hard way that concealment didn't work in the long term. The high-stakes world of finance was too damn small. In the end, his past always found him.

Better to show his stuff first, let them know he had the chops, get all the way to the job offer. And then take a deep breath and lay the bad news right out there.

The offer just might stand in spite of his past. If it didn't, if he lost the job, well, chances were he would have lost it anyway in the end, when the ugly facts surfaced.

Oh, yeah. A delicate moment, this. The moment of truth.

Helen said, "Well, Tom. You've heard our offer. Is there anything else we need to go over?"

Tom sat back in the chair, ordered his body to relax and told himself—for the hundredth time—that it had to be done.

"As a matter of fact, Helen. There is something else..."

She arched a brow at him and waited for him to go on.

He said, “I was fired once. It was a long time ago, my first job out of Princeton.”

“Fired.” Helen spoke the word flatly. “That’s not on your résumé, is it?”

“No. And it gets worse.”

“I’m listening.”

“I was young and way too hungry, working on Wall Street, determined to make it big and do it fast. None of which is any justification for my actions. I was discharged for insider trading. And then I was arrested for it. And convicted. I did six months.”

A silence. A pretty long one. Tom could feel yet another great job slipping away from him.

At last, Helen asked the big question. “Were you guilty?”

“Yes. I was.”

He might have softened the harsh fact a little. He could have explained what a naive idiot he’d been then. He could have told her all about his mentor at the time, who’d convinced him to pass certain “tips” to big clients. He could have said that the guy got away clean by setting Tom up to take the fall for him. That the same former mentor had been a curse on his life since then. Because of that one man, Tom had lost out on a number of opportunities—and not just in terms of his career. It would have been the truth.

However, his former boss wasn’t the one up for CFO, TAKA-Hanson, hospitality division. Tom was. His prospective employer

needed to know that he'd once broken the law—and then gone to jail for it. The why and the wherefore?

Not the question.

Tom sat unflinching, waiting for the ax to fall.

Instead, Helen smiled.

It was a slow smile, and absolutely genuine—a warm smile, the kind of smile that would make any red-blooded man sit up and take notice. From what Tom had heard, this genius of the business world, now in her late forties, had saved Hanson Media from collapse several years back, after her first husband, George Hanson, died suddenly. The story went that before she was forced to step in and save the family business, she'd been a trophy wife.

Smart and savvy and strictly professional as she'd been since he met her, Tom had been having trouble seeing her as mere arm candy for a tycoon. But now he'd been granted that amazing smile, he wasn't having trouble anymore.

That face, that smile...

George Hanson had been one lucky man. And so was her current husband, TAKA-Hanson's chairman of the board, Morito Taka.

"I prize honesty," Helen said. "I prize it highly. So I think it's time I repaid your truth with one of my own. I've done my homework on you, Tom. I've known all along about how you lost that trading job, and the price you paid for what you did. I've been interested to see if you'd tell me about it. And now that you have, I'm more certain than ever on this. Other than

that one admittedly serious black mark against you—for which you’ve paid your dues—your record is spotless. I know you’ll make a fine addition to my team. I’ve got no reservations. You’re the man for this job.”

Tom’s heart slammed against his breastbone. Had he heard right? Had it worked out, after all? The CEO knew the truth.

And she’d hired him anyway.

He held out his hand. Helen took it. They shook.

When he spoke, his voice was firm and level. “I intend to make sure you never regret this decision.”

“I believe you,” said Helen. “That’s another reason you’re our new CFO.”

Chapter One

The present...

In the humid darkness of a warm June night, a long, black limousine eased up to the curb of a modest brick bungalow in the Chicago suburb of Forest Park.

Inside the luxurious car, Shelly Winston turned to the uncle she’d met for the first time that evening. “Would you like to come in? I could—”

“Sorry.” Drake Thatcher, handsome as an old-time movie star, with coal-black hair and eyes to match, waved away her offer before she’d finished making it. “Thanks, Shelly. I really can’t. I’ve got a flight to catch. I want to be touching down at Teterboro two hours from now.”

Teterboro. Even Shelly, who didn’t travel in exclusive circles,

had heard of the New Jersey airport where all the rich people kept their private jets. The Kennedys flew in and out of Teterboro. And of course her long-lost uncle did, too. Drake was rich, after all. At dinner, he'd told her about his bicoastal lifestyle. He owned a penthouse on the Upper East Side, a beachfront estate in Miami and a Century City condo in Southern California.

The dinner Shelly had just enjoyed had been the finest she'd ever tasted. The lobster had been flavored with hyacinth vapor, whatever that was. And the licorice cake she'd devoured for dessert had been topped with a special muscovado sugar. The menu had no prices on it, but she had a feeling the tab and tip together would have taken care of her mortgage payment for the month—her mortgage which wasn't overdue yet. But would be. Soon.

“Thank you, then,” she said sincerely. “For the wonderful dinner. And even more, for the lead on that job at TAKA-Hanson. It sounds like just the kind of thing I'm looking for.” *Not to mention what I need. Bad.*

Drake pushed a button and the privacy window behind the driver slid up the rest of the way. Then he leaned across the plush seat toward her, bringing with him the smell of expensive aftershave. It was a fine scent, but he'd laid it on a little too heavily.

He pitched his voice to a confidential level. “I mean it, Shelly. You need to get on that tomorrow. Make a move and make it fast. It just so happens you're in luck with this. I got word that

the job would be opening up ahead of their HR department. But it'll be snapped up before noon, take my word on it.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be there waiting when they open the doors.”

“Excellent.” He patted her shoulder and sat back in his own seat again, taking the heavy cloud of pricey cologne with him.

“Well, I’ll let you get going then. I mean it. Thanks so much.”

“One more thing....”

“Sure.”

He glanced away, then back to her. “It’s not a big deal, just... you might be wiser not to mention my name at TAKA-Hanson.”

Shelly frowned. “But I don’t see—”

Another wave of his well-manicured hand. “Shelly. I’m sure you know that the business world is a cutthroat one. Unfortunately, in the past, I’ve found myself going head-to-head with more than one top TAKA executive. No, it probably won’t make any difference if you mention that I suggested you apply there. But then again, why take a chance of starting out on the wrong foot with them?” His smile was wide and oh-so-charming.

And Shelly had a powerful suspicion that she was being played.

But for what? Her long-lost uncle had asked nothing of her. All he’d done was to take her out for an expensive dinner and give her a terrific lead when she happened to mention she was looking for a job.

She kept it light. “Honestly, Uncle Drake. What could the TAKA-Hanson people possibly have against a wonderful guy like

you?”

Drake shrugged. And backed off the point. “Listen. If you feel more comfortable telling the clerks in HR that your uncle suggested you should apply there, go for it.” He glanced at his Rolex. “And I’ve got to get rolling.”

“Thanks again.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m glad we got together. Call me. Soon. I want to hear all about how much you love your new job.”

Inside the house, Shelly turned on the air-conditioning. The day had been hotter than usual for early June and the house was stuffy. She’d been doing without air-conditioning over the last couple of unseasonably warm days. It cost money to keep the place cool—even a small house like hers.

But she could afford to splurge on a little cool air tonight. Because tomorrow she was getting that job. It was exactly the kind of top executive assistant position she’d been looking for.

She flopped to the sofa and grabbed a throw pillow to hug. “TAKA-Hanson, here I come!” The cheer in her voice sounded more than a little forced.

But why wouldn’t it? All she had was a tip, after all. There were no guarantees. Maybe someone else had an inside track on the position, too. Maybe her uncle had been wrong and there was no position, after all.

The house seemed so empty. She missed Max. A lot.

Shelly tossed the pillow aside and reached for the phone, auto-dialing her mom’s number.

“Hello. Winston residence. This is Norma.” Norma Winston had been a librarian for over thirty years. She’d retired five years before, but she still answered the phone in a formal tone.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Honey. Hi.”

“I know he’s asleep, huh?”

“That child.” A world full of love was in those two simple words.

“Keeping you busy, is he?”

“I love every minute of it.” Six-year-old Max stayed with his grandparents for a month every summer. Shelly’s mom and her dad, Doug, loved having him there. And Max loved the time he spent with them. Shelly missed her son. A lot. But she enjoyed the break from single parenthood, too. Especially this year, when she’d been out of work for three months and was starting to get seriously stressed about it.

“Give him a big kiss for me, huh? Tell him I’ll call tomorrow.”

“You know he’d rather call *you*.”

“No kidding.” It was Max’s latest thing. Memorizing important phone numbers, making the calls himself. “Okay. Have him call about six. I’ll be home by then.”

“Home by then?” her mother echoed hopefully. “Something come up on the job front?”

“Oh, Mom. Cross your fingers for me and say a little prayer.”

“Honey, you know I will.”

“I heard about this great job opening up. Just tonight, as a

matter of fact. You'll never guess who I heard it from...."

"Someone I know?"

"Uncle Drake."

"Drake...Thatcher?" Her mom sounded as surprised to hear her half brother's name as Shelly had been when she'd picked up the phone and heard his deep, smooth voice on the other end. Norma Winston and Drake moved in completely different circles. They exchanged Christmas cards, but that was about the extent of their keeping in touch.

"He called this afternoon. He was in town, he said, just for the day. He wanted to meet me. He said it was about time."

"Well. I guess so...." Her mother's voice trailed off. Shelly knew she was wondering what could possibly have inspired her half brother suddenly to take an interest in Shelly, when up until now he'd behaved as if she didn't exist.

"It is kind of strange, huh?" Shelly voiced her doubts. "I mean, him calling up out of the blue like that?"

"No. No, of course it isn't. I think it's...nice. It's never too late to get to know your family."

Shelly smiled again. Her mother was such a sweetie. Norma's father, Bart Thatcher, had divorced Shelly's grandmother and married "up" into a wealthy New York family, leaving his original family behind. Drake was the first child of Bart's second marriage. He'd grown up rich as they come, while Norma had started out with so little. But Shelly's mom had made a good life for herself and held no grudge.

“He took me to dinner,” Shelly said. “And when I told him I was looking for a job, he said there was something coming available at TAKA-Hanson. You’ve heard of Hanson North America, right?”

“Oh, yes.” Norma Winston prided herself on staying informed. She took three newspapers: the *Mt. Vernon Register-News*, the *Tribune* and the *New York Times*. She read all three, too.

“Uncle Drake says Hanson Media merged with a giant Japanese company called TAKA Corporation some years back, becoming Hanson North America here in the States. Since then, under the name TAKA-Hanson, the merged company branched out into other things, beyond the media business. Including this way upscale, exclusive hotel chain. I guess Uncle Drake’s got an ‘in’ there or something, though he was pretty vague about how he knew the job would be open.”

“But you’re excited?”

“Yeah. I am. I have a feeling this is it.”

“Well. I *know* it is.”

“Mom. That’s what I love about you and Dad. You’re always so sure good things will happen.”

“Because they will,” her mother said. And then she laughed. “Nothing but good news ahead.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

Shelly was ready and waiting at the TAKA-Hanson building

the next day when the human resources office opened. She turned in her résumé and made it through two tiers of interviews. When asked what brought her to apply at TAKA-Hanson, she played it safe and left her uncle Drake out of it.

“I like what I’ve heard about the company,” she said. It was true. She’d spent two hours on the Internet before bed the night before, researching like crazy, learning all she could about TAKA-Hanson, which had home offices in Chicago and Tokyo. “And it occurred to me I ought to come in and get my résumé on file,” she added. “Just in case.”

The woman across the desk nodded. “As it happens, your timing is perfect. We’ve learned this morning that Tom Holloway, CFO in our hospitality division, will be needing a new assistant.”

Yes! Inside, Shelly was jumping up and down, doing the happy dance. But when she spoke, it was in her most polished, professional tone. “It sounds like exactly what I’m looking for.”

The woman clicked her mouse and frowned at her computer screen. “If you’ve got time, I’d like to go ahead and send you upstairs now. You’ll meet with Verna Reed, the woman you would be replacing.”

“I have time. Definitely.”

The elevator ride to the top floor seemed to last forever. But the doors slid wide at last and a slim, fiftyish woman was waiting on the other side. “Shelly? I’m Verna. Follow me....”

They went to Verna’s desk in a roomy alcove outside a closed

door with Tom Holloway's name on it. Verna looked over Shelly's résumé and explained the job duties and asked questions about how Shelly might handle this or that situation. Shelly felt she did well. And she liked Verna, who was friendly and down-to-earth.

"I love this job," Verna confessed. "The money's great, there's lots of variety—and Tom Holloway is my hands-down favorite as bosses go. But my husband's retiring. You should see the RV he went out and bought. We've always said someday we'd travel together, see America, all that." She cocked her neatly combed head. "Let me see if Tom can spare a minute or two for you right now. What do you say?"

Shelly's heart did a forward roll. *Yes!* "I'd love to meet Tom."

Two minutes later, Verna ushered her into the sunlit corner office. The man behind the wide desk looked up. He had gorgeous blue eyes. "Shelly. Hi." He rose to greet her.

His jacket was nowhere in evidence and his silk shirt, which exactly matched those unforgettable eyes, was rolled to below the elbows. She took the hand he offered. His grip was solid. Strong.

When he released her hand, he gestured toward a nearby chair. She sat.

"Verna seems to think she's already found her replacement." He had a great voice. Deep and firm. Warm. And so...manly.

She grinned then. She just couldn't help it. "I think so. And I really hope you think so, too."

He had her résumé and application up on his computer. "Let me have a look here...."

She waited, thinking how attractive he was, wondering if she was happy about that or not. Having a hunky boss could be a distraction.

But hey. She could learn to live with that. She could learn, easy.

“Everything seems to be in order here.” He sent her an approving glance. “Two years at Southern Illinois University studying business...and until a month ago, you were managing the office at Coffey Fire Alarm, Incorporated?”

“That’s right. Life kind of got in the way of my getting my degree.” Life in the form of a beautiful baby boy. “And at Coffey, I wanted a promotion. And more money. They were happy with my work—you can see they gave me a great letter of recommendation. But they’re a small company. I was running the office for them. That was the best they had to offer.”

“So you quit.”

“Yes. I loved working at Coffey. But after making several requests for a raise and a promotion, and being told there was nothing available unless I wanted to move over into sales, I felt the job was going nowhere. I wanted to be free to look full-time for something better.” She didn’t mention the sleepless nights since then, the worry and the guilt. What sensible single mom quit her job when she didn’t have another one lined up? At the time she handed in her resignation, she’d felt she just couldn’t bear another day in the job that went nowhere. But months without a paycheck had shown her otherwise.

Tom was nodding. Did that mean he liked her answer?

God. Interviews. Like walking through a minefield of handshakes and loaded questions and cordial smiles.

“What brings you to TAKA-Hanson?”

He *would* have to ask that one. She hated to lie. And really, why not just tell him the truth? Her uncle’s name was on the tip of her tongue. But with her savings on life support and the perfect job in the palm of her hand, she couldn’t do it, couldn’t take the risk of losing what she needed so much.

She played it safe and trotted out the same story she’d given the woman down in HR. It seemed to fly.

“You’ve heard about our hotel project, then?” he asked.

She had. From Drake, when he’d told her about the job. And from her research the night before. “I saw that article in the *Tribune*. The Taka San Francisco will open in the fall, right?”

“A soft opening,” he said. “Gives us a chance to work out the kinks. Our grand opening will be in Kyoto, Japan, over the holidays.” He was quiet again, studying his computer screen. “I see there’s a child.”

“Yes. My son, Maxwell. He’s going into first grade this year.”

“You’re not married,” he said thoughtfully, his eyes on the monitor. She’d checked *Single* on the application.

She hitched up her chin. “That’s right. It’s just Max and me.”

“I’m guessing your ex-husband has the boy some of the time?”

“There is no ex-husband. In fact, Max’s father is not in the picture.”

“You’re...on your own?”

Irritation made her curt. “Yes.” What business was it of his that Max’s dad hadn’t wanted a kid? “Is that important, somehow?”

He sat back from the computer screen and rested his elbows on the arms of his plush leather chair. “I don’t mean to offend you.” His sincere tone and direct gaze banished her annoyance.

“You haven’t.” Or if he had at first, she was over it.

“I only asked about the child’s care because I travel. To the west coast and to Kyoto, currently, to keep an eye on construction and development at our flagship sites. I’m gone for several days a month. Sometimes I’ll go on my own, but more often than not, I’ll need my assistant with me. Will you be able to manage that, with your son to consider?”

Okay, it wouldn’t be easy. But she could make it work. Because she had to. “If I have at least twenty-four hours’ notice, I can make arrangements for my son’s care. And for the next few weeks, it won’t be an issue. Max is down in Mount Vernon—that’s my hometown. In southern Illinois, not all that far from St. Louis. He’s staying with my parents.”

Those dreamboat-blue eyes measured her. Did he find her lacking somehow? Did he have doubts that she could handle a demanding job, with travel, *and* take care of her son?

Shelly sat tall. Though her palms felt clammy and her pulse raced, she faked calmness and confidence for all she was worth.

A sweet, open, girl-next-door face, a megawatt smile and

a sharp mind. Plus, she took no crap from anyone. Even a prospective boss.

Tom had liked Shelly on sight. Not only did she seem exactly right for the job, there was something... direct about her. Something true. Her handshake was firm, her references good ones. Tom had the feeling he'd be able to count on Shelly Winston, that he'd quickly come to trust her.

Strange, to find himself thinking of trusting someone he'd just met. As a rule, he was more cautious. He'd learned early that it never paid to trust anyone until they'd proved they could be depended on.

Whatever. The point was, she seemed competent. Quick on the uptake and qualified.

He was damned relieved to find someone so quickly. If he had to lose efficient, dependable Verna, his assistant since he'd come to TAKA-Hanson, at least it was looking as though he had her replacement lined up.

He scrolled through the paperwork once more. Everything seemed in order. All he had to do was give the final okay and HR would confirm her references. By tomorrow, Verna would be showing her the ropes.

“It says here you can start right away...”

She beamed him that beautiful smile. “The sooner the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Mom. You can tell me. Are you missing me too much?” Max used his most serious voice.

“Yes,” she said, hugging the phone to her shoulder, wishing he was there so she could hug him in person. “I miss you more than words can ever say.”

“You don’t need me to come home or anything, do you?”

“Do you want to come home?”

He hesitated. “Uh. Well...”

She smiled to herself. “I think you mean no.”

“Well. I’m having a whole lot of fun, that’s all. But I’ll come home if you need me.”

“You stay right there. And don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I promise. Tell me about what you’ve been up to with Granny and Grandpa?”

“I caught two frogs down at the creek today.”

“Big ones?”

“Yep.” Her parents had two acres. A small stream ran about a thousand yards behind the house. “Granny let me keep them in a jar. I even punched holes in the top so that they can breathe. But I only get to keep them for a day, she said. I have to let them go so they can eat a lot of flies. I caught some pollywogs, too. One has legs. I want to watch it turn into a frog, but that takes time, Granny says. And Grandpa took me to get ice cream yesterday. I had vanilla. I like vanilla....”

He babbled away, intent on sharing each small, special detail of his summer at his grandma’s house. Shelly listened and made admiring, interested noises at the right moments, all the while picturing his pointy little chin and his thick, unruly wheat-colored

hair. One big cowlick, that hair of his. It stuck up from his head even when she tried to comb it down.

She wondered if he'd lost his glasses again, or broken them. The thought brought another grin. She could afford to grin over broken glasses now. She had a job. They'd be calling to tell her she was hired tomorrow. She just knew they would. Tom had as good as said she was hired, though the formal offer had yet to be made.

Finally, Max ran out of steam. "And that's all. I'm having fun, like I said. And I'm being good. And I had a little problem with my glasses when I left them in Grandpa's chair and he sat on them. But it's okay. Granny taped them up good as new."

"I'm sure she did." She made a mental note to call the optometrist and have another pair made. "I love you."

"Love you, too. I think I better call you again. I think it should be soon. You know, so you won't have to miss me too much."

She suggested Saturday and named a time.

"Okay. I'll call you then. Granny's here to talk to you now...."

Norma didn't bother with hellos. She went straight for, "Well? How did it go?"

"Really good, Mom."

"You got the job?" Her mother sounded almost as excited as Shelly felt.

"I think so. I should know for sure tomorrow."

"I just know this is it, honey."

"Oh, Mom. I hope you're right."

“Of course I’m right. You’re going to get that job.”

Shelly hardly slept that night. She couldn’t wait for morning and the phone call she felt certain was coming. She was up at six, dressed and ready to take on the world by a quarter of seven.

Too keyed up to eat, she sat at the two-person table in her small kitchen, staring at the phone in front of her, drinking cup after cup of strong, black coffee.

Nine o’clock went by. Ten. Ten-thirty...

At ten after eleven, the damn thing finally rang. Shelly jumped in surprise and then gaped at it, hardly daring to believe, almost afraid to answer for fear it would be some telemarketer or a friend from her old job calling to ask how she’d been doing.

She let it ring twice, just to prove that she could, and then she snatched it up in the middle of the third ring. “Hello?”

“Shelly Winston, please.” It was one of the women from TAKA-Hanson HR.

Shelly spoke with great poise as she accepted the job. With amazing composure, considering the fact that she could now do miraculous things: pay her mortgage, order new glasses for Max, head over to Dominick’s and buy herself a fat filet mignon, and not care in the least that it was seventeen dollars a pound. “I’ll be at the office tomorrow at nine. Goodbye.” She hung up the phone.

And then she ran around the house yelling, “Yes, yes, yes, yes!”

Once she’d finished shouting out her joy, she called her

mother and basked in Norma's pleasure and praise. Before she hung up, her mom said, "When you call your uncle to thank him, thank him for me, too."

"I will, Mom."

Drake. She certainly did owe him a big, fat thank-you. She called. And got his voice mail.

"Uncle Drake. It's Shelly. I just want to thank you. I got that job at TAKA-Hanson. I can't tell you how much this means to me. Thank you...." She let out a self-conscious laugh. "But I guess I said that already. Oh. And my mom says thank you, too. ..."

What else? She couldn't think of anything. She said goodbye and hung up.

After that, she got out all her unpaid bills and wrote the checks, addressed and stamped the envelopes and put them in the mail. Because she could. Then she went to the store and bought groceries, including a small, beautiful, way-too-expensive filet mignon. She also applied for a passport. And since she would probably be needing it soon, she paid extra to get it fast.

The afternoon went by in a warm glow of anticipation for the job she just knew she was going to love.

Shelly did love her new job.

And she really liked her new boss. Truthfully, she liked Tom a little *too* much, and she knew it. There was just something about him—beyond his good looks and strong handshake, his sense of humor and that tempting aura of power and command he wore so

confidently. There were...shadows behind his eyes. Though he never came across as brooding or sad, she still had a feeling he'd been through tough times—and come out a better man for them.

She constantly reminded herself that a *feeling* was not reality. He'd probably been born into privilege. And if he'd suffered, it had been over whether to go to Harvard or Yale.

Yes, she liked him. And she was attracted to him. But so what? Nothing was going to come of it. She was there to work, not to get involved with the boss.

On her fifth day on the job, Verna announced she was leaving a week earlier than she'd planned.

“After all,” the older woman said. “No point in having the two of us in each other’s hair when it’s perfectly clear to me you can handle everything just fine on your own. I’m going to talk to Tom about this right now. I’m thinking I’ll finish out the week on call. I’ll be out of your way, but you can give me a buzz if necessary. Monday, you’re on your own. And Hank and I will hit the road. What do you say to that?”

“I say I really hate to see you go...”

Verna laughed. “But you can’t wait for the chance to have this desk to yourself. Well, it’s all yours. Starting tomorrow, I’m outta here.”

The phone was ringing when Shelly got home that night. She raced in the door and grabbed it on the fourth ring, just before her machine picked up.

It was her uncle Drake. “I hear you’re exceeding expectations

at that new job of yours.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I thought I explained that. There are always ways...” Which explained exactly nothing.

“Uncle Drake, I’m starting to think you have spies at TAKA-Hanson.” She said the words jokingly, even though she had a feeling he did have spies at the company. He would have to, wouldn’t he, to have known about her job before anyone else did, to have found out that she was doing well when she’d been there a week and was still, technically at least, a trainee?

He went on as if she hadn’t spoken. “Assistant to the CFO, hospitality division. I like the sound of that.”

“Me, too.” She reminded herself that she ought to be grateful to him. She *was* grateful to him. “And seriously. I love this job. It’s exactly what I was hoping to find. And thanks to you, I did find it. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your mentioning that it might become available.”

“Glad to help. Now, I want you to get good and settled in. Prove yourself trustworthy. That’s important. Next time I’m in Chicago, we’ll have dinner again. We’ll talk. I might have a favor or two to ask by then.”

Alarm jangled through her. Was her long-lost uncle setting her up somehow? For what?

Cautiously, she asked, “What kind of favor are we talking about here?”

“No need to get ahead of ourselves.”

“But I really would like to know. You keep hinting that there’s something I can do for you, but you never—”

“Well, I was thinking along the lines of a little... information gathering. As Holloway’s assistant, you’ll have access to certain sensitive material I can’t get any other way.”

“Access to what, exactly?”

“Later. Right now, you only need to do your new job and do it well.”

“Uncle Drake, are you telling me you want to spy for you?”

She heard him sigh. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t. I need to know specifically what you’re going to expect me to—”

Again he interrupted her. “Don’t worry, Shelly. I just wanted to congratulate you and tell you to keep up the good work. I’ll call you. Soon.”

Before she could say another word, she heard the click on the other end. He’d hung up. She set the phone down carefully and tried to decide what she ought to do next.

Call him back and demand specifics? She knew already what she’d get for that. He’d tell her again not to worry.

Should she call her mom, ask for advice? No. It wasn’t her mom’s problem and she didn’t want to worry her.

But the situation made her nervous. Her uncle, who’d spent most of his life behaving as if her branch of the family didn’t exist, showed up out of nowhere, wined and dined her and then

told her where to go and what to do to get the kind of job she'd been seeking for months with zero success.

It was too perfect. Add his warning that she shouldn't mention him at TAKA-Hanson? Definitely suspicious. And now he'd told her right out that in time he would want her to spy for him.

But so what? She'd done nothing wrong. She *would* do nothing wrong.

And until her uncle actually asked her to do something unethical, she would mind her own business and not borrow trouble.

Chapter Two

The next day, Shelly claimed Verna's desk for her own. She got to work at seven-thirty and set up the computer the way she liked it. She went through the desk drawers and rearranged them to her personal satisfaction.

Tom arrived at eight-fifteen. "First day flying solo, huh?" He wore a designer suit and a tie that matched his eyes and she thought he looked amazing.

"I've got Verna's cell on auto-dial if I need her. Which I won't."

"Confidence. I like that." He looked at her with admiration. She resisted the urge to smooth her hair. "Give me fifteen minutes and we'll go over the calendar."

"Will do."

He disappeared into his office and she stared at the place he'd been, grinning like a fool.

Note to self: mind on the job, not on the boss....

The day progressed without a single crisis—not on Shelly’s end, anyway. She put the final touches on the arrangements for Verna’s retirement party, which she’d managed to move up to tomorrow night after Verna had confided that her husband wanted to head for some RV park in Ohio on Sunday.

Tom spent most of his day putting out fires.

He had to call an emergency meeting about the San Francisco flagship site. The hotel was supposed to be opening in September and the interiors, according to the site manager there, were a disaster. The designer was not only over budget, but also behind schedule. *Way* behind schedule.

There was also some problem at the Kyoto site. The facility there was still under construction, and things had been moving right along until the past few weeks. And there were accounting issues, as well. Tom took another long meeting with his managers to discuss the situation.

Friday he told Shelly he would be going to San Francisco on Monday and then to Japan on Thursday. “You’ll probably have to move a few meetings around for me. Go over my appointments and make the calls. Push everything to the following week, if you can. We should have the day here in Chicago on Wednesday, so you can pack it with whatever can’t be put off till the week of the thirtieth. Let me know if there are issues.”

“Yes. Of course.”

He said, “And I’d like you with me for both trips.”

With him...

Somehow, Shelly managed not to jump up and down in her chair. This was the life. Jetting to the west coast. Zipping off to Japan...

She'd get packed over the weekend. It was going to be fabulous. She needed a decent suitcase. One of those new ones with four wheels. She'd pick one up Saturday morning. They couldn't be *that* expensive, could they?

He asked, "Can you manage it?"

"It?" She blinked.

"Two trips in one week?"

"Uh. Yeah. I can. I'm with you. No biggie." Max would still be in Mount Vernon next week. Childcare wouldn't be a problem. Not this time.

"Got a passport?"

"Yes, I do. I took care of that on the day I got the job."

"Good. What else? Everything under control for Verna's party tonight?"

"Everything's a go. I just got off the phone with the caterer. And I checked around the office to make certain they all knew we'd changed the date. From the responses I got, we should have a great turnout."

They held Verna's retirement party in a friendly little bar on a side street, a few blocks west of the office. Most of the women from HR were there, along with the lower-level executives from the finance department and several of the secretaries and

assistants Verna had worked with in her twenty-two years at Hanson Media, then TAKA-Hanson.

Verna's husband, Hank, came, too. And Tom, of course.

The beer flowed freely and the food was cafeteria-style, set out in chafing dishes on a long table. Customers grabbed a plate and helped themselves.

Verna got a Rolex to mark the occasion and Tom gave a little speech in her honor. And he offered a toast. "To Verna. We'll miss you. Think about us now and then while you and Hank are out there seeing America...." He raised his beer glass to his former assistant as Hank put his arm around her and kissed the top of her graying head. Everybody clapped and cheered.

From the stool she'd claimed down the bar, Shelly raised her glass high and joined in the toast, happy for Verna, even happier for herself.

Someone tapped her shoulder. She swiveled her chair around. "Hey, Lil." Lillian Todd worked for one of the finance managers. She had sleek red hair and a killer body. She seemed to spend most of her time in the break room and making the rounds, chatting up all the secretaries, flirting with every guy in sight. Verna had confided in Shelly that it was lucky for Lil she was as smart as she was sexy. She spent so much time gossiping and making eyes at the men, she needed to be fast to get her work done, too.

"Doing all right on your own?" Lil had to shout to be heard over the rowdy crowd.

Shelly nodded, and shouted back, “So far, so good.” Lillian opened her mouth to say something else—but then she blinked and aimed her sexiest smile at a point past Shelly’s shoulder.

“Terrific party.” The male voice, deep and warm and threaded with humor, spoke in Shelly’s ear.

Tom. She turned to him—and tried not to get lost in those baby blues of his, tried not to sigh over the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, over the five-o’clock shadow on his manly jaw. His suit jacket, as usual, was nowhere in evidence. His tie was gone, too. He’d rolled his shirtsleeves the way he liked to do.

The strangest feeling washed through her. A mix of excitement—and tenderness.

Tenderness? For a man she’d known less than two weeks? That hardly seemed possible. Yet somehow, it *was* so.

The party seemed to get louder by the minute. She had to lean close or shout. She leaned. “Having fun?”

“You bet.”

Someone in the corner let out a whoop and everyone started laughing and clapping again. It simply wasn’t the kind of party where you could have an actual conversation.

So she nodded and sipped her beer and stared into those eyes of his. They actually twinkled. Funny. Until Tom, she’d thought that twinkling eyes were more a figure of speech than anything that occurred in nature.

He leaned toward her again. She met him halfway. He smelled of some subtle aftershave and soap. And man. All man.

“Hungry?” He set his empty glass on the bar.

She set hers beside it. He gestured toward the table with the food on it and she slid off her stool and started walking, aware with every step that he followed. They filled a couple of plates and went back to the bar.

Since it was such a chore to try to talk, they ate to the rowdy laughter of their coworkers and the occasional shouted good wishes directed at Verna and Hank.

Shelly had hired a DJ and the place had a postage stamp of a dance floor at one end. Hank gave the DJ a big tip and a list of favorite tunes. Then he pulled Verna onto the floor. They swayed to the music. A few other couples joined them. Not too many. There wasn't that much room.

Shelly watched, feeling sentimental. Hank and Verna reminded her a little of her parents: married forever, still going strong.

Tom leaned close again. “Dance?”

She slanted him a look—wanting the dance, wondering if they were carrying this a little too far. For the umpteenth time, she reminded herself that the last thing she needed was an office romance.

Especially one with her boss.

Even if he did have the bluest eyes in Chicagoland.

But then again, it was just a dance. No big deal....

He held out his hand. She settled the light chain strap of her bag more securely on her shoulder and put her hand in his. His

lean fingers closed around hers. Warm. Strong. Good.

Too good.

It was another slow one. Hank seemed to have picked all slow ones. A real romantic, that Hank.

Tom pulled her into his arms. Shelly tucked herself into him—not too close, just enough that she could feel his body’s signals as he led her.

Neither of them said a word. That suited Shelly just fine. It was...lovely. A few brief moments out of time. One hand enclosed hers, the other fitted itself possessively on the curve of her lower back. Shelly closed her eyes and cleared her mind of thought, enjoying the sweet strains of the old, romantic song. And even better than the music was the heat of Tom’s body, so close to hers, the light caress of his big hand at her back, the occasional rough brush of his cheek against her temple.

It was over much too soon. A fast number came on next.

Hank groaned, “What about my list? That one’s not on my list.”

Everybody laughed, more of them crowding forward onto the floor, fast-dancing to the heavy rock beat of the new song.

Tom dropped his hand from her back. But he didn’t let her go. The fingers of his other hand stayed firmly wrapped around hers. He led her off the floor.

She was far too content with going wherever he felt like taking her. Not smart, and she knew it. Professionally speaking, she really ought to break up this twosome they somehow seemed to

have formed. It was one thing to spend a little social time with her boss.

And something else altogether when it started feeling like a date, when she found herself imagining what it might be like to kiss him, to walk down a summer street in the heat of the evening, holding hands with him. To...

Uh-uh. Enough. Not going there. No way.

She slowed her steps and gently pulled her hand free of his. He turned back to her with a questioning frown.

“Ladies’ room.” She mouthed the words and stuck a thumb back over her shoulder.

He shrugged and nodded.

She turned and left him, quickly, before she found some excuse to stay.

In the ladies’ room, she freshened her lip gloss and brushed her hair. It didn’t take long. But if she went back out too soon, Tom could be waiting where she’d left him.

She entered a stall, feeling kind of silly, but wanting to give Tom plenty of time to find someone else to hang with. When it finally got too ridiculous just standing in there, she emerged and washed her hands.

As she was reaching for a towel, Lil came out of one of the other stalls.

“Hey, Shel. Havin’ *fun*?” She put the oddest emphasis on the word *fun*.

Was it some kind of dig? But the other assistant met her eyes

in the mirror, a friendly smile on those plump red lips.

“Yeah,” Shelly said. “I am. A real good time. You?”

“Fabulous.”

Out in the bar, the party was still in full swing. Shelly caught sight of Tom, over at a corner table with some of the other execs from the finance department and a couple of guys she was pretty sure were from down in accounting. She started to turn and go the other way, but Tom spotted her and signaled her over.

She went to him, aware of a rising feeling in her chest, wishing she wasn't so glad that he'd caught her before she made her escape. The others made room for her, leaving the chair beside him empty.

Shelley sat down next to her boss.

“I was beginning to wonder if someone had kidnapped you.” He leaned close as he spoke to her, though he didn't really need to.

The noise level seemed to have faded down a few notches in the last half hour or so. The bar wasn't so crowded. People had left to catch their trains home, and those that remained talked more quietly—over at the bar, and around the tables.

She smiled at him, her widest, warmest smile. “Nope. Not kidnapped. Right here, safe and sound.”

“It's a relief. I can't afford to lose another assistant. I might not be so lucky next time finding a replacement.”

They looked at each other, the eye contact drawing out longer than she should have allowed it to.

Then Jessica Valdez, one of Tom's managers, brought up the interior-design issues they were having at The Taka San Francisco. The rest of them started talking at once—offering complaints, suggestions and even a few solutions. The guys from accounting really got into it. Riki, the internationally acclaimed designer, was on everyone's bad side.

"Never trust a guy without a last name," grumbled one of the accountants.

"Maybe Riki *is* his last name," joked a junior finance exec.

"Two names," said one of the finance managers. "A guy should have two names. First and last. It's fiscally irresponsible to try getting along with one. Not to mention damned pretentious."

Tom called a halt to the subject after a while. "I know it's an issue. And *you* all know I'll be dealing with Riki face-to-face on Monday. And Thursday, I'll get with Robby." Robby Axelrod was in charge of construction on the Kyoto site. "See what we can do about the cost problems there."

A few minutes later, Verna and Hank came over to say goodbye. Shelly got up and gave Verna a hug. "Send me a postcard."

Verna grinned. "I promise. I'll keep in touch. And thanks for the party. It was terrific."

Tom got up, too, and walked the couple to the door of the bar. When he came back to the table, everyone else started making going-home noises.

Since Shelly had taken charge of the party when she moved

up the date, she went ahead and played hostess. She stuck around till the last stragglers called it a night. Finally, she flipped out her shiny new TAKA-Hanson credit card and paid the tab.

Tom took the padded bench in the vestibule and waited for Shelly to head for the door.

She seemed surprised to see him there. “Hey. You didn’t have to wait.”

He rose. “Can’t have my favorite assistant wandering out onto Clark Street alone.”

She gave him a laugh. He really liked her laugh. “I think it’s totally safe, Tom.”

“You never know.”

She lifted her slim wrist and glanced at her watch. “It’s not even nine.”

“Almost dark. Could be dangerous.”

“The biggest danger isn’t the kind you can protect me from.” Her brandy-colored eyes teased him.

He took her arm and turned her for the door. “Tell me all about it.”

“Michigan Avenue. It’s in walking distance and I’ve got plastic. Blocks and blocks of great stores. I could end up spending a whole lot of money I don’t even have.”

“So I swear I won’t take you shopping. Whew. Another bankruptcy averted. Aren’t you glad I’m here?”

She smiled again. He loved her smile. “Okay. I’m glad. Happy now?” She looked worried, suddenly. “Where’s your jacket?”

“You’re a hell of an assistant. Nothing gets by you.”

“If someone’s walked off with your suit coat...”

“I left it—along with my tie—at the office.” He guided her through the door into the warmth of the evening. “Nice out.” He kept her hand wrapped around his arm and headed north on Clark, for no other reason than that staying on the move seemed a good way to keep her with him.

They were going to be working closely together from now on and it never hurt to get a little social time with his assistant. No, he’d never walked arm-in-arm up Clark Street with Verna. But then, Verna was fifty-four and happily married. Different assistant, different approach.

Tom wanted to know more about Shelly. That seemed perfectly reasonable to him. He liked her and she was a colleague, a colleague who interested him. A lot.

In no time, they’d reached Washington Square. They walked around the park, admiring the elaborate masonry buildings erected by Chicago’s elite after the famous fire at the end of the nineteenth century. Then he led her on the path that ran diagonally through the center of the square.

He said, “I thought we ought to get to know each other better.”

She paused on the concrete walk. “How well is ‘better’?”

“Well, I don’t know. Better than we know each other now.”

He guided her forward a few steps.

But she only stopped again and pulled her arm from his. They stood exactly in the middle of the square of park, facing each

other. “I want this job, Tom. I love it already.”

“Good.”

“And I need it. I don’t want to do anything that could potentially screw it up.”

“I don’t see how you could screw it up. You’re very good, Shelly. Smart. Efficient. With strong office skills.”

“I’m not talking about how good I am at my job.”

Tom gave up finessing her. He looked at her steadily. “Of course you’re not.”

She caught her lower lip between her pretty white teeth. “I... This is so awkward. And I’m scared that you’re going to get offended—or worse.”

“I’m not. I promise you.”

She laughed, a nervous sound. “Men do, you know?”

He wanted to touch her. But he kept his hands to himself. “Not me.”

She pressed those soft lips together and nodded. “Well. Good. Sometimes...office romances work out fine.” She spoke slowly. Thoughtfully. “But sometimes —probably more often than not—they end with someone hurt. Or someone angry. Then working together becomes too difficult. I can’t have that happen. I really can’t.”

He got the message. Loud and clear. It was a reasonable argument, and he could understand her fears. He wanted to tell her not to worry, that no matter what, she wouldn’t lose her job as his assistant. But he had no right to promise such a thing. In

the end, there really were no guarantees.

“Come on.” He touched her arm, but didn’t take it. She went with him the rest of the way through the park to a row of iron benches on the edge of the square, facing the imposing facade of the Newberry Library.

For a while they just sat there. Tom let the silence spin out. It was full dark by then, the streetlights blooming bright, the fountain in front of the library bubbling away, making those happy splashing sounds as the water shot upward and tumbled back into the fountain’s bowl. An old couple strolled past, the man frailer than the woman. He held her arm and leaned heavily on a cane. And there were others, most walking fast, in a hurry to get wherever they were going.

“You live in Forest Park, right?” he asked after a while.

She sent him a glance.

He put up both hands. “Don’t shoot me. It was on your résumé.”

An unwilling smile broke across those full lips. She shook her head. “Do you ever give up?”

“Persistence. Key to success. Tell me about your place.”

“Tom...”

“Come on. It’s getting-to-know-you time. Totally innocent.”

“Hah.”

She had him pegged. It wasn’t innocent. Tom knew that. Not innocent in the least. He was drawn to Shelly. Powerfully. She made him want to take the kind of chances he’d long ago stopped

taking.

He knew he should respect the boundaries she'd just set. But when he looked into those brown eyes of hers, well, what he *should* be doing seemed of no importance.

“About your place...?”

She blew out a breath. “Oh, all right. It's got three bedrooms and two baths. My parents helped me buy it. It's small, but it's mine.” She turned to him. In the glow of the streetlamp a few feet away, her eyes were dark velvet and her skin shone like pearls.

Tom smiled to himself. He knew she liked him. Maybe more than she wanted to like him. He'd take it a day at a time. Anything might happen.

As a rule, he would never consider seducing his secretary. But he *was* considering it. More than considering it. It felt...right, somehow, with Shelly. He wanted her. *And* he liked her. That seemed a rare thing to him. As each day passed, Tom was only more certain that, between him and Shelly, the rules didn't apply.

She said, “You realize I know almost nothing about *you*.”

“Is that an accusation?”

She sighed. “Well, yeah. I guess it is. Where do *you* live?”

“I've got a great condo on East Randolph.”

“Right in the Loop.” The Loop was downtown, so named because the train system looped in a circle around it. Living space there was at a premium. She went on, “I might have guessed. And you can see Grant Park from your balcony, right?”

“Yeah. I can see it.” He nudged her with his elbow. Gently.

She shot him a wary glance. “What?”

“We could go there right now. I’ll show you my... view.”

She laughed. “I think you’re dangerous.”

“Who, me?” He did his best to look harmless.

“Let me guess. You’re from somewhere back east. You went to Yale. You were on the rowing team...”

“Princeton. Coxswain, heavyweight men’s crew. I had a full ride.”

“In the rowboat?”

He chuckled. “I meant scholarships. They covered everything, tuition, fees, living expenses. I never would have gotten near the Ivy League otherwise.”

A frown crinkled her smooth forehead. “Not from a rich family? Not from Pennsylvania or Massachusetts or upstate New York?”

“I was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. My dad was a janitor and my mom worked in a dentist’s office. They were older. My mom was forty-five when she had me. I was their only kid.”

“Was?”

“Yeah. They died years ago. My dad went first. Heart attack. My mom followed not long after.” He didn’t say the rest, that the stress of his arrest and the trial for insider trading had really taken it out of them. Dan Holloway died while Tom was in prison. Tom got out in time to be at his mother’s bedside when she went.

Shelly’s big brown eyes were soft. “Wow. That’s tough. How

old were you when you lost them?”

“Twenty-four.”

“I can’t imagine getting along without my parents.” She put her hand on his arm. It felt damn good there. Warm. And steady. “I’m sorry, Tom.”

He looked into her eyes and felt like a fraud. *They died because I broke their hearts....*

He had the craziest urge right then, to tell her everything. All the gory details. His apprenticeship in greed, ambition and corruption under a master manipulator, his long free fall from grace.

It was an urge he had little trouble resisting. He wasn’t going there. He liked Shelly. He wanted to get to know her better. A *lot* better.

But some ugly stories were better left unshared.

He lowered his arm from under her touch. “You do what you have to do. I went into the army after they died.”

“Time for a change, huh?”

“You could say that. When I got out, I got my MBA on the GI bill from the University of Texas. I worked in Dallas and Atlanta, then Dallas again. And then back to New York. And now Chicago.”

“Back?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you went *back* to New York....”

Way to blow it, Holloway. He tried to act casual as he covered

his ass. “I had a job in New York before my parents died.” And he went right on before she had a chance to ask him what kind of job. “What else? My favorite color is orange and I’m becoming a Cubs fan. I hate Thai food, love Italian. Two serious relationships.”

“Marriages, you mean?”

“Uh-uh. Never went that far. Now you. Come on. It’s only fair. Favorite color?”

“I love blue.”

“And about the Cubs?”

“The Cubs are tops with me. I like Thai food, like Italian better. I have a thing about tuna fish. Love it.”

“A little mercury. What’s the harm?”

“Exactly. Never been married, either—and I see those questions in your eyes.”

“Busted. Your son’s father...?”

“Okay. Since I feel like we’re *almost* friends—in a strictly professional way...”

He made a circular, move-it-along motion with his hand. “Yeah?”

“I got pregnant in college. The boy didn’t want anything to do with being a dad. He agreed to sign papers giving up his rights to Max. I haven’t seen him since.”

“That’s cold. Signing away your own kid.”

She shifted on the bench, turning her body toward him. “Honestly, I’m not bitter.” She looked so...earnest. And damn

it, he wanted to slide his fingers under her hair, hook his hand around her neck and pull her close for a kiss.

But he played fair—for now—and held himself in check. “I like your attitude, Winston.”

“Hey. Thanks.”

There was one of those moments. The fountain across the street burbled away and people hurried past a few feet from the bench and Tom and Shelly grinned at each other like a couple of lovestruck fools.

Lovestruck...

Strange choice of words. Yeah, he liked her. He *wanted* her. But it was way early to be using the word *love*.

He made himself break the eye contact.

After a few seconds, she said, “It’s worked out all right for me and Max. It...wasn’t meant to be, between Max’s dad and me. And Max is smart and funny and happy. And loving. He doesn’t need a dad who’s not one hundred percent there for him.”

“I want to meet this kid.”

“Just don’t give him your phone number.”

“What?”

She laughed. “Oh, nothing. It’s his thing lately. He’s discovered the wonder of the telephone. He likes to make phone calls—you know, dial the number all by himself—and then talk your ear off.”

Tom grinned. “Definitely. Need to meet him.”

“Well, he’s with his grandparents until the first of July. So

you'll just have to wait." She rose before he could reach out a hand and stop her. "This has been great, Tom...."

He resisted the strong urge to grab her hand, to hold on until she sat back down beside him.

With a shrug, he stood. "At least I know your favorite color now."

She tipped her chin up to meet his gaze. The fountain lights made those brown eyes of hers gleam golden. "Yeah. Top priority. Knowing that your secretary loves blue."

"You never know when information like that will come in handy."

"Oh. Right." Her voice was breathy. In spite of her insistence that she wouldn't get involved with him, her eyes begged for a kiss. "And that I like Italian food. That's so important...."

Her full lips tempted him. One kiss. What could it really hurt? Two kisses. Three.

A night full of kisses. He wanted that. With this woman. He wanted it bad.

Time to hail a cab. He saw one coming and raised a hand. The cab slowed and stopped at the curb.

Two steps and Tom was pulling open the door. He gestured her in.

She hung back. "Uh. No. Really, I'll just catch the train. It's no problem."

"Shelly. Get in."

Chapter Three

“Four hundred East Randolph,” Tom told the driver as the cab pulled away from the curb. He turned to Shelly. “He’ll take you home from there.”

“Great. Thanks.” Shelly stared out the smeared window on her side of the cab.

Traffic was relatively light. In no time they were sailing down Michigan Avenue, turning onto East Randolph....

The cab pulled up to the curb in front of a high-rise.

Tom sent her a glance and a nod. “See you Monday, then.” He knocked on the partition. The cabby slid it open and Tom handed some bills through. “Take her to Forest Park.”

The cabby smiled. “Sure, man.”

“Thank you.” Shelly spoke softly.

Tom gave her a last smile. “Don’t be late for the flight.”

“I’m never late.”

“I noticed.” He pushed open his door and he was gone.

The cabby said, “Where to in Forest Park?”

She gave him her address. The ride home took a half hour. She spent most of that time telling herself she wasn’t disappointed in the least that he hadn’t tried to lure her up to his apartment.

The flight to San Francisco was commercial, first class. Nonstop. And on time. They left the ground at 7:20.

Tom spent an hour or so going over spreadsheets and answering e-mails. Shelly caught up on some letters Tom wanted in the mail by Wednesday and listened to her Fast and Easy Japanese CD, which she’d copied to her iPod, in preparation for

the trip to Kyoto on Thursday.

At eight-thirty Chicago time, Tom shut his computer down. Shelly took off her earbuds and put her iPod away.

“Breakfast?” he asked.

“Please.”

He hadn't said a word about Friday night. Since she'd met him at the gate at six, he'd been friendly in a strictly business kind of way.

That was great with Shelly—just great. Or so she kept telling herself.

They ate bacon and asparagus frittata, croissants and excellent coffee. First class, she was discovering, not only had roomy, comfortable seats, but also better food than you got when you went coach.

He briefed her on Riki, the world-famous designer who was way behind schedule on the fabulous interiors at The Taka, SF.

“Riki's got the credentials,” Tom said. “He's done the mansions of some of the biggest names in the business world. And he's designed hotel interiors before. High-end boutique-style hotels. Even a small chain. He hasn't done anything on this scale up till now, but he came to us highly recommended and his plan for the project was just what we wanted. We're not getting why he's messing up so damn bad now.”

“Riki. I swear I've heard of him. Did he ever have a TV show?”

Tom nodded. “*Million Dollar Design*. He's still doing it. Syndicated. Interior design for the rich and famous—mostly

high-level money men, Donald–Trump types.”

“Very tall, very thin—with red hair combed into a swoosh at the top of his head?”

“That’s Riki.”

“The times I saw the show, he really laid on the drama. Yelling at people, treating every setback like the end of the world.”

“That’s just his act for the cameras. It plays well. Viewers love a train wreck—one he always pulls out of at the end, with everybody happy and another rich executive living in his dream house.”

“I guess....”

“But behind the scenes, Riki’s strictly professional. At least in terms of his behavior. And his designs are amazing. Too bad he’s not getting the job done. At this rate, we’ll be putting off the September opening. And that can’t happen.”

“What will you do, replace him?”

“I’m hoping it doesn’t have to come to that.”

Speaking of luxury hotels...

The one they stayed in was downtown. Shelly’s room had a gorgeous view of the bay, a bed like a cloud, a flat-panel television and an open shower. She unpacked quickly and met Tom in the lobby.

Outside, the streets were steep, the sun shining and the temperature in the high sixties. The air smelled of the sea, which surrounded the city on all sides.

Shelly heard the charming ring of a cable-car bell as they

ducked into a cab. It was a short ride to The Taka, which looked pretty fantastic from the outside: twenty-five stories of silver-gray granite and sparkling glass.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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