

A romantic couple, a man and a woman, are shown in profile, facing each other and about to kiss. The man is wearing a blue shirt and the woman is wearing a dark blue tank top. They are positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image. The background is a deep red with a large, faint, stylized rose graphic on the left side. In the upper right, there is a photograph of fireworks exploding in a dark sky. The word "Desire" is written in a white, elegant script font, partially overlapping the couple and the rose graphic.

Desire

A CASE
OF KISS
AND TELL

Katherine Garbera

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A Case of Kiss and Tell

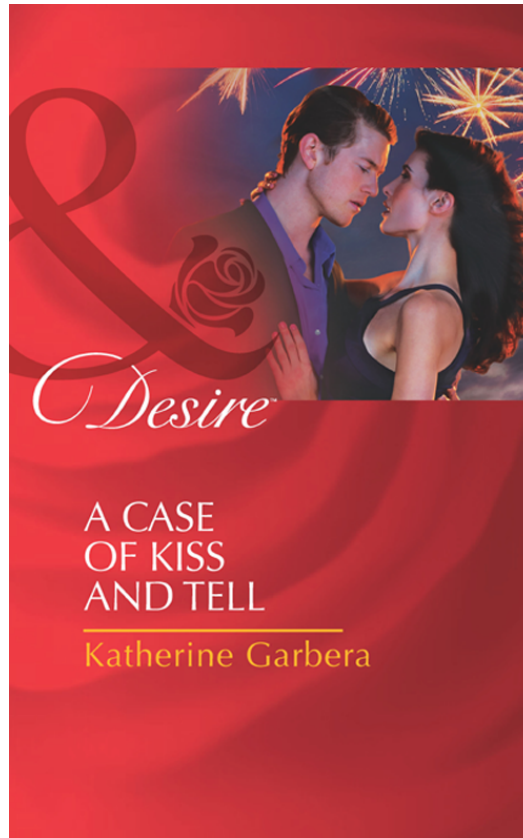
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His offer was on the table ... and his face was just inches from hers.

She bit her lower lip. A part of her wanted Conner to talk her into this deal. That way, she wouldn't have to accept all the blame for the fallout.

"Tell me something that will make it worth my while. Sweeten the pot for me," Nichole said.

"I want you."

Those bald words sent a shiver down her spine. She wanted him, too, but she wanted him to want her enough to not make it a business deal.

She licked her lips, and he tracked the movement with his eyes. His pupils dilated right before he brushed his lips over hers. Just that touch sent a pulse of desire through her entire body.

She turned her head to the side. "I want you, too, but I'm not going to give in to physical desire."

"That sounds like a challenge." He flashed a wicked smile. "You should know I never lose."

Dear Reader,

This book was just an absolute dream to write. From the moment Nichole Reynolds appeared on the page, Conner couldn't keep his eyes or his hands off her. I was trying to create something a little different with these characters. I wanted them to be smart and sassy with lots of zingers flying back and forth, but I also needed them to be real people with real problems to deal with.

Conner was almost easy once I decided that he'd be single, because the one man from whom he should have learned how to be a husband and father—his own—had betrayed him. That set in stone the kind of man that Conner was. He secretly longs for something he can never have.

Nichole just wants the story of a lifetime at first, but then as she gets to know Conner she wants so much more. She really hopes that she can heal that injured part of him, never realizing that his idea of whole might be very different from hers.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Katherine

About the Author

KATHERINE GARBERA is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than forty books, who has always believed in happy endings. She lives in England with her husband, children and their pampered pet, Go-diva. Visit Katherine on the web at www.katherinegarbera.com, or catch up with her on Facebook and Twitter.

A Case of Kiss and Tell

Katherine Garbera



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to Rob, Courtney and Lucas.

I love you guys.

Acknowledgments:

There are many people to thank for their help and support during the writing of this book. First of all, my husband for giving me the freedom to just write—there truly aren't words to thank you for that. Also to my kids for just making me laugh when I was stuck on the plot and couldn't figure out where to go. And last, to my editor, Charles Griemsman, for being a great sounding board for ideas and of course for his deft editing.

One

Conner Macafee was used to reporters snooping around his family. His great-uncle had been a confidant of John F. Kennedy, and Conner's own family were considered American royalty in politics and business. Of course, they had more than their share of scandals as well, which had always kept the press interested in them.

But Nichole Reynolds, the society reporter for the national newspaper *America Today*, was going about it in an entirely new way. She'd crashed his family's Fourth of July party in Bridgehampton and was doing her best to fit in, but so far she'd done little but stick out. She'd tried to blend by faking an ennui with the dignitaries and A-list celebs who were in attendance. But Conner couldn't help but notice her gushing more than once to the model and polo star Palmer Cassini.

Conner had gone to school with Palmer and knew him to be a fun-loving partier. He was an intense athlete, but also a hell of a fun guy, and Conner counted Palmer as one of his closest friends. But Palmer didn't hold his interest the way the redheaded reporter did.

He knew why Nichole was here. He'd turned down numerous interview requests from her and her bosses. He understood that she was a friend of Willow Stead, the producer of *Sexy & Single*, the reality television show that featured his company, Matchmakers, Inc. With the TV show under way, Nichole intended to write a series of articles on the matchmaking service his grandmother had founded. But he didn't trust reporters and never talked to them. That's why he had a marketing manager, Zak Levy, who was handling all the promotion and press releases. Conner had been very careful to keep out of the spotlight.

"Who is she, Conner?" his mother, Ruthann Macafee, asked, coming up next to him.

"Who, Mother?" he asked, pulling his gaze away from Nichole. He assured himself that keeping an eye on the reporter was the only thing that interested him. Not her lush red hair, which flowed in waves past her shoulders, or the stunning white sheath dress she wore. But he knew that he was lying to himself. He wanted her and if he'd had any idea how potent the attraction would be, he would have granted her an interview at his office weeks ago.

"The woman you keep staring at? I don't recognize her so I suspect she doesn't run in our circles," she said. His mother was sixty-five but looked at least fifteen years younger, thanks to her active lifestyle. She played in a tennis league and ran a charity. She'd never been the type of woman to sit at home, and Conner admired her for it. Even when a plane crash had taken his father's life and revealed a scandal that would have broken many women, she'd carried on in that quiet strong way of hers.

"Nichole Reynolds—reporter," Conner said.

"Oh, dear. I wonder why she's here." He heard a hint of fear in his mother's voice. She didn't like reporters, and with good reason. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders in a quick hug.

"That reality TV show I'm doing ... she wants to interview me."

"Truly? Are you going to do it? It's so gauche to talk about your private life." Conner bit back a smile at his mother's attitude. To say she was old school was a major understatement.

"I'm well aware of that," he said, leaning down to kiss his mother on the forehead. "I think I'd better get rid of her before she makes any problems for us."

"Good idea. Do you want me to ask Darren to escort her out? How did she even get in here?"

"The head of security doesn't need to be bothered with this," Conner said. He'd been handling women like Nichole since he'd turned fourteen. "She probably came as a plus one."

"Next year I'm going to make sure that the invitations are better vetted," his mother said. "I don't want her kind getting in here."

"Whose kind?" his sister, Jane, asked, joining them.

Jane was a posh and trendy woman who had her own cooking and lifestyle show on TV. She didn't shy away from the media the way Conner and his mother did, but then Jane had been sheltered from most of the fallout from their father's infidelity.

"A reporter."

"Scourge of the earth," Jane said, winking at him. "Where is she? I'll go take care of her."

His sister was a troublemaker, and Conner knew the only way to deal with her and their mother was to end this conversation. "I'm handling it."

"Which one is she?" Janey asked.

"The redhead," his mom said.

"Oh, I see why you want to 'handle' her. Go for it, big bro," Jane said.

"Mom, I think you should have disciplined Janey a lot more when we were younger. She's a complete brat."

"She's perfect," their mom said as Jane stuck her tongue out at Conner.

He shook his head and walked away from both women. He worked his way through the well-heeled party crowd, picking up a firecracker mojito—Janey's creation—from a uniformed waiter on his way to Nichole and Palmer.

She glanced up as he approached, and Conner saw the guilty look in her eyes a moment before she masked it with a brazen smile.

"Conner Macafee," she said, with a little too much enthusiasm. "Just the man I've been wanting to see."

"Nichole Reynolds," he said, matching her energy. "Just the woman I don't remember inviting."

"With women there is always some sort of intrigue," Palmer said.

"Indeed," Conner agreed. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I always do," Palmer said.

Nichole looped her arm through Conner's and led him away from Palmer. "If I waited for an invitation from you, I'd never have the chance to talk to you in person."

"That's because I don't do interviews." Conner's father had been very involved in politics. Even after he'd left office, he'd been in a high-profile business that had demanded lots of press and reporters having access to his life. As a teenager Conner had been photographed and interviewed by every society magazine. He'd hated living in a fishbowl and had vowed never to allow it to happen again once he was an adult. Something he'd been very successful at, even though he lived a jet-set life and had a reputation as something of a player, he didn't give interviews and was seldom, if ever, caught by the paparazzi.

"I think you're reacting negatively to someone in the past," she said, dropping her arm from his once they were far from the crowd. "I promise it will be painless."

"Maybe I like pain," he said, primarily to bait her but also because there were times when pain was the only reminder he had that he was alive.

She narrowed her gaze as she stared at him; he knew she was trying to guess if he was telling the truth. "So how about answering a few questions?"

"No, ma'am."

"I'll do anything to get this interview, Conner."

The hint of determination in her tone intrigued him. It had been a long time since anyone had been so dogged to get something from him.

"Anything?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm known as the girl-who-gets-her-story and you're making me look bad at work."

"We can't have that now, can we?" he asked, stepping closer into her personal space and letting his hands fall lightly on her shoulders. She was tall for a woman—probably five-eight—but she only came to his chest and he liked the feeling of power he had looking down at her.

“You do know I don’t give interviews,” he said.

“But this is different. You’re doing a television show.”

“Not me, my company. There’s a very big difference,” he said.

“Your dad didn’t see it that way. He practically lived on the pages of the *Post*.”

And that was precisely why Conner wouldn’t. “I’m not my dad. And the answer is still no.”

“Please,” she said, tipping her head back and pouting up at him.

Her luscious red lips made him want to groan out loud. He felt a zing of lust shoot straight through him.

“I might do it, but the price will be high,” he said, knowing he’d never sit for an interview with her. But he wanted her and didn’t see why he couldn’t indulge the fantasy a bit.

“Name it,” she said.

He lifted a strand of her hair and wrapped it around his forefinger. She held her breath as a blush spread over her neck and cheeks. Her creamy skin with the light dusting of freckles was smooth under the fingers of his other hand.

He wanted her.

But he knew he’d never have her. He couldn’t be with a woman he couldn’t trust, and at the end of the day her loyalties would always be with her newspaper. But he wasn’t about to let her go without stealing at least a kiss from her. He suspected the shock of what he was going to say would drive her away and maybe even cost him that kiss he wanted so badly. But that was his intention. Self-preservation won out over lust ... well, sort of.

“Be my mistress for a month and I’ll answer all your questions,” he said.

Nichole stared up into the bluest eyes she’d ever seen and tried to make sense of what he’d just said. She’d never imagined she’d be so turned on by someone so ... well, conservative. She would have to call him that. To be honest, he was so far out of her league, she knew he must be toying with her.

She was used to doing whatever it took to get a story but this was ... risqué and daring and she wanted to say yes. But ethics made her back down. She suspected he’d said that to push her away and that made her mad.

“A month?” she asked. “What kind of secrets are you hiding, Mr. Macafee? I had only planned on asking you about Matchmakers, Inc. But for that kind of price, I’d have to have full access to every part of you.”

She knew he wouldn’t negotiate with her. Why would he? She’d read the papers back when his father died. She knew the scandalous stories of the second family that Old Jed Macafee had kept hidden and she remembered seeing the photos of Conner and his sister, Jane, as they’d been caught leaving the country on a private Learjet owned by a Greek billionaire. There had been something so sad about the once-press-friendly teenagers suddenly donning dark glasses and refusing to look at the cameras.

Conner was never going to let her interview him. She’d known it was a long shot from the beginning, but she’d gone after it anyway. Her dad always said you had to break a lot of eggs to make an omelet.

“No, you wouldn’t,” he said. “If you agree to this, I will specify the parameters and if you break one of the rules outlined for you, then you leave and never bother me again.”

She shook her head. “If I agree, then we will hammer out an arrangement that works for both of us. Why would you even suggest this?”

“Because I know you are going to say no,” he said with the confidence of a man who knew he held all the cards. “Though I would really like to kiss you.”

She knew the offer of an interview had been too good to be true. She’d never be able to be someone’s mistress. Her mother would have a cow for one thing. She raised all her daughters to be strong and independent. But that didn’t mean that Nichole didn’t long to feel Conner’s arms around her.

“One kiss, one question?” she suggested.

He arched an eyebrow at her. “And that would be enough for you?”

“Is one kiss really going to be enough for you?” she countered. She had never felt instant lust for a man before. Well a man in real life. There was no denying that the first time she’d seen Daniel Craig as James Bond she’d been in instant lust. But this was real. Conner was touching her and she didn’t want him to stop touching her.

“No,” he admitted.

“Good. Then we keep the kiss-question ratio?”

He shook his head. “One kiss is all I want. More than that and you’d have to agree to being my mistress.”

His mistress. That sounded oddly exciting to her as she’d always secretly wanted to be Gigi and have Louis Jourdan take a look at her and decide he wanted her. But could she do it?

“I want to do a series of interviews about dating and the way that our society is dominated by online dating sites and services like Matchmakers, Inc. I hadn’t planned on asking you anything personal, Conner,” she said.

“You wouldn’t have asked me if I ever used those services?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Okay, I would probably have asked you some personal questions, too. I’m a good reporter.”

She was dying to know if his father’s secret family was the reason why he was still single. And she knew that if she got this story from him, she could name her own price and sell it to the highest bidder. But the price was high. Could she still look at herself in the morning if she agreed to this kind of arrangement?

Newspapers paid for interviews all the time, but paying with her body ... well, it didn’t feel right to her. Could she string Conner along? Make him think she’d sleep with him and sort of give him enough kisses to get what she needed without going through with it?

Ugh! She had no idea. Especially since the spark of lust that had ignited from the first moment she’d seen him was now growing inside her.

Conner was asking her for something she’d never given any other man—control over her body. But he was offering her something he’d never given any other woman—entrée into his very private and secluded life.

“I thought so. What will it be, Nichole? Do you want to come with me and be my mistress or should I signal one of the security staff and have you escorted from the property?”

She tipped her head to the side, weighing the matter carefully. Of course she should say no. There was no other answer that made any sense. But being sensible wasn’t at the forefront of her mind just now.

She was intrigued. Turning away, she led him to a bench surrounded by high hedges so they had some privacy.

His hands were on her shoulders, the waves of his body heat engulfed her and the scent of his one-of-a-kind aftershave enticed her. She wanted, at the very least, one kiss.

“I can’t decide until I’ve had one kiss,” she said. She’d always been a gambler who wasn’t afraid to take a chance and maybe get the big payoff. A kiss shouldn’t be that big a deal. But there was something in Conner Macafee’s eyes that made her believe it was.

“Why?”

“So I know exactly what I’m bargaining for. Sexual chemistry doesn’t always add up.”

He stroked one hand down her bare arm until he reached her waist. Wrapping his hand around her, he drew her closer until they were pressed against each other. His other hand slid deeper into the hair at the back of her neck. He positioned her so she was off balance and she had to grab on to him. She held him at his waist and looked up again into those blue eyes of his.

He lowered his head slowly, watching her the entire time, and she licked her lips, which felt dry. But Conner didn't move any faster. He had thick lashes that were as dark as his black hair. They were pretty, she thought, but then everything about this man seemed to be pleasing to her.

She felt the brush of his breath over her mouth a second before his lips touched hers. His were moist and hard and perfect. The caress of their mouths was light and made her lips tingle. He angled his head and then she felt the tip of his tongue slide over her lips and into her mouth.

He rubbed his tongue over hers and she forgot to breathe as the tingling from her lips spread down her neck and chest. Everywhere he touched her became a hot spot of intense feeling and she leaned more firmly into him. She pushed her tongue against his and tasted the inside of his mouth.

He pulled back, but continued to hold her. She knew that walking away from Conner Macafee was the only sensible thing to do. But her body was aching, her breasts felt full and she wanted to rub them against his firm chest. His eyes were narrowed as he studied her and she saw a hint of indecision in those eyes.

That hint was enough to convince her that Conner was as thrown by their embrace as she was. She held on to him, lifting her head and rubbing her lips over his one more time before stepping back.

"So, is it question time?"

"Yes. And that counts as a question," he said.

Damn. She should have realized that playing games with him was going to be a challenge and winning wouldn't be that easy.

"Let's talk," she said. "I didn't realize you'd be so tricky."

"Not tonight," Conner said. "I have to get back to the party."

She wasn't about to let him walk away ... not like this. She stopped him with her hand on his arm. He half turned toward her and she stepped in front of him and put her hands on either side of his face and kissed him for all she was worth.

His hands went to her waist, holding her to him as his mouth fell to hers. This kiss was brazen and bold, earthy and sensual. It tore her apart at the moorings, leaving her nothing to hold on to except Conner. And she clung to him.

She was shivering as he lifted his head and came back for nibbling kisses before he gently disengaged from her.

"So yes to being my mistress?" he asked. His tone was arrogant, but she knew he had every right to feel confident.

She'd just thrown herself at him. "Not so fast. I have a question for you and no cheating like last time."

"Why do you want to ask me another question?" he asked.

"I need to be sure the information you're giving me is worth the price I'm paying for it."

"Very well," he said. "Ask your question."

"Why are you still single when you own a very successful matchmaking service?"

"I prefer to be," he said.

"That's cheating."

"How do you figure?"

"That's a nonanswer," she said.

"That's the only one I have ... so are you still interested?" he asked.

"Maybe. But your answers are going to have to be better," she said.

"I'm holding all the cards," he said.

"Are you?" she asked, knowing he wanted her. She went back over to him and this time she didn't kiss him. Instead she leaned in close, letting her body brush against his. Her breasts were against his chest as she put her hand on his shoulder and leaned close to his ear to whisper directly into it.

"I think I have something you want."

His hands came to her waist and drew her hips forward until his nudged her. She felt his rock-hard erection pressing against her center and shivered.

“We will hammer out the details in the morning,” he said. “Be at my office at eight.”

She nodded, but he’d already turned on his heel and was walking away. All she could do was watch him leave, but she knew she’d won a victory of a sort. The chemistry between them wasn’t something that could be denied and she wasn’t going to let him keep pushing her away.

There was no need for her to stay now, so she headed for her car. She knew that it was risky, but she was going to take him up on his bargain—she wanted both the story and the man.

Two

The next morning Nichole dressed to the nines before leaving her apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirrored elevator on the way down and the wolf whistle she attracted getting in the cab confirmed she was rocking it.

Normally she would have walked the few short blocks to Conner's office building, but she wasn't taking any chances with messing up her hair or her heels. She'd had one get stuck in a subway grate just last week. If she was bargaining with a master like Conner, she had to bring her A game.

She gave the cabdriver the address and sat back, forcing herself to relax. But her mind was a jumble of last night's kisses and the questions she wanted to ask. She was going to be like Ann Curry—friendly and seemingly open to him but asking the hard questions he didn't want to answer.

She needed to show him that she was here to win. That she was a serious reporter ... but the fact that she'd bargained a question for a kiss might have jeopardized that. She'd just needed entrée, though.

The cab pulled to a stop in front of Conner's building and she paid the driver before getting out. She took a deep breath as she stood and walked toward the revolving door. The street was busy with commuters on their way to the office. She didn't hesitate as she walked boldly into the lobby.

She smiled at the security guard as she told him her name and he got so flustered he dropped his pen. She gave herself a mental high-five and took the guest badge he handed to her. He directed her to the middle bank of elevators.

She got on the elevator and was surprised to find she was on her own on the ride up. When she got to the correct floor, she exited and saw the large logo for Macafee International. When she entered the office, the receptionist took her name and directed her to have a seat in the guest lounge, which she did.

She was offered coffee but she declined. She wasn't here for beverages. She was here for Conner Macafee.

"Ms. Reynolds, please follow me," the receptionist said after a couple minutes.

She was led down a long hallway to an office with Conner's name on the door. It was open and she stepped inside. The first thing she noticed was the size of the office. It was huge, with a wall of windows that overlooked the city. She stood there for a minute with the sun casting a shadow over Conner so she couldn't see his reaction to her.

She walked into the room and found he'd stepped around his desk to offer her his hand.

"Morning, Ms. Reynolds."

"I think we've moved beyond formalities at this point, Conner. Please call me Nichole."

He shook his head. "Bold as ever."

"Did you really think I would have changed overnight?" she asked. "Maybe you aren't as savvy as I gave you credit for being."

He laughed, and the sound made her want to smile. He was fun. If they'd met under different circumstances ... maybe. Maybe, what? she asked herself. They would never have met if her friend Gail Little hadn't decided to go to a matchmaker, which had ultimately led to the TV show.

Gail had decided to give matchmaking a try after she'd struggled to find a guy she wanted to really date. As the owner of a PR firm she was busy and didn't have time. When she'd told Willow and Nichole about the service, Willow had jumped on the idea of filming Gail's experiences for her next TV show.

"I'm sure I'll still surprise you," he said.

She was sure of that, as well. "So have you decided to give in to me and just do the interview? Think how refreshing it will be to get it out of the way."

“Please have a seat,” Conner said. “I think you must be getting light-headed if you believe that an interview would be refreshing for me.”

She walked to the leather armchair placed in front of his desk and sat down. She leaned back and crossed her legs while he watched her. She shifted on the chair and let the hem of her dress ride a little farther up her thighs to see his reaction.

His pupils dilated and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. Now she knew that she hadn’t imagined the attraction between them last night. It had been so strong and so potent she was almost afraid that she’d been dreaming.

“Have you thought more about being my mistress?” he asked.

“I thought I made it clear that I wouldn’t do that ... I was hoping you’d have come to your senses,” she said.

“There is nothing wrong with any of my senses ... I’m a man who goes after what he wants, Nichole, and I always get it.”

“You’ve met your match,” she said. “I never lose.”

“Never?”

Not unless she counted her rather nasty childhood, but Nichole never did. That was the past and she’d been too young to know how to deal with it.

“Not in recent memory,” she said. “I’m sure we can come up with something—”

“I already have. I want you. You want me. We both have something the other desires. Now it simply comes down to figuring out how far each of us is willing to go to get it.”

She knew he was serious. She could see it in his eyes. “I’m willing to keep the kiss-to-question ratio.”

He shook his head. “I’m not. I can’t believe you’d be satisfied with that scenario. I’m not the kind of man who multitasks that way. When I have you in my arms I guarantee that you won’t be thinking of questions.”

A warm shiver slid down her spine. She wanted to be in his arms and she knew it would take very little for him to do what he’d said. She could just give up on the interview and have an affair with him. It would be like lightning hitting dry ground, striking hot, causing a fire to burn out of control until it was put out.

Then he’d go his way and she’d be left alone. She leaned back in the chair, uncrossing and recrossing her legs because she knew it would distract him and give her time to think. But the extra time didn’t make her path any clearer. She wanted more than an affair.

She could find white-hot sex if she wanted it, but this interview was once in a lifetime. And she doubted that Conner would want her if she just gave in. She was going to make him chase her.

“I don’t think so, Conner,” she said. “You seem like a very competent man and I am more than confident that if you put your mind to it you could answer my questions easily ... unless you’re afraid of what you might reveal if your guard is down.”

She saw that her comment hit its mark as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. Where before he’d been leaning forward to engage her, now it was as if a barrier had come down between them. Here was the Conner Macafee she’d expected to find.

He didn’t like that she’d already found a chink in his armor. He knew the only way to handle Nichole was to show her the door and get on with his life. But he wasn’t used to losing and didn’t intend to start now. She wanted him and she wanted her interview and he thought it was about time she learned that Conner Macafee didn’t back down.

He was going to have her and she was going to acquiesce to his demands. No other solution would satisfy him.

“I have no weaknesses, Nichole, but you are welcome to keep looking for them.”

She shrugged delicately and uncrossed her legs again. His eyes immediately tracked the movement. He liked the bit of thigh he kept glimpsing with each shift she made in the chair. He sensed that she was doing it to distract him and probably to turn him on, but he didn't mind.

He liked that feeling of being on the edge of control. It made him work harder to keep his focus and not let her win this round.

Or any round. He didn't like losing and he hated that she was using her innate femininity as a weapon. He knew she was aware of it—well, at least suspected she knew how much she affected him. Duh, right? He'd offered to make her his mistress. She knew he wanted her.

"Everyone has weaknesses, Conner, and I've already figured out one of yours," she said.

"And that would be?"

"You like to be in charge, and if someone threatens that control you don't like it," she said.

He shrugged. "That's not an unusual reaction."

"No, it's not. But you know that I have something you want and I'm not going to give it up easily," she said.

"I'm very glad. I don't like things that are easily attained."

She smiled at him then and he knew that she was savoring the sparring as much as he was. In another world he would have enjoyed knowing her as a woman, not just as a sex partner.

"Good. So here's my thought. We start with my questions—"

"Not happening, honey. No matter how many times you cross and uncross your legs, you aren't going to get me hot enough to agree to that."

"What would get you hot enough?" she asked.

He shook his head, unwilling to reveal that her flirting with him would be enough. "Become my mistress and you'll find out."

"I'm trying to avoid that," she said.

"Why? We both know it's what you want," he said.

She nodded. "It is. But I have my professional integrity to think about."

"Integrity. I didn't know that crashing a party had any high moral value."

"I came as a plus one," she said.

"Whose?"

"Um ..."

"That's what I thought. I admire that you're willing to go to any lengths to get this interview," he said.

"How can you be sure of that?" she asked.

"You are sitting here," he pointed out. "As I was saying, I admire your guts. But I think you need to acknowledge that all of your cards are on the table and I'm holding an ace up my sleeve."

"Are we playing for high stakes?"

"Yes, I believe we are. I don't want you to think that my offering to make you my mistress means I don't respect you."

"Sure you do."

"I definitely respect you and I want you. It's the easiest way for us both to get what we want. It's a business arrangement."

"I'm not interested in that," she said. "Perhaps if you knew what I was writing about, it would make you see there's nothing to fear and we could try to have a normal relationship after I write the article."

He wasn't interested in that. He knew from his own feelings on the matter of relationships that he would never marry or settle down. And though he'd never formally had a mistress, in general the women he involved himself with knew he wasn't in it for the long haul.

"I doubt that would work," he said.

"Why? Because I'm not from your echelon?"

He shook his head. “Not at all. It’s just that I’m not relationship-minded. Never have been. I saw the dark side of it from my parents’ marriage, of course, but also from friends. It’s just not to my taste.”

“I’d love to quote you on that.”

“Well, you can’t.”

“Honestly, Conner. That is the type of article I want to write. I think even you can see that it’s not invasive at all.”

“I’ve already offered to let you interview me if you become my mistress.”

“What if I just ask you about the business?”

“You can do that through my marketing department.”

“But your marketing department isn’t you. I want to know why someone who’s so disdainful of relationships would try to set people up.”

“In a word?”

“If that’s all you will give me,” she said.

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. He liked that she never just gave in. “Money.”

“Money?”

“That’s right. There’s a lot of money to be made from people looking for that special someone.”

“That’s so cynical.”

He gave a wry shrug of his shoulders. “Obviously I don’t run around telling our clients that, but that’s my feeling. If the company didn’t make money I would have cut it from my portfolio a long time ago.”

She leaned forward. “I thought it was a family business.”

“That’s all you’re getting out of me until you agree to the terms.”

“What terms?”

“I will answer your questions and you will be my mistress.”

“For how long?” she asked.

“A month,” he said. “Long enough for us both to still enjoy each other.”

“You’re not listening to me,” she said quietly. “I’m not going to just bow to your wishes.”

He stood up and walked around the desk, stopping right in front of her and leaning back against it, his long legs stretched out so that his well-shod feet were on either side of her. “I won’t hold it against you when you do.”

She wanted to scream. He was frustrating and so arrogant she wanted to take him down a peg or two. She was tempted to agree to his deal and then back out of it when she got what she wanted. Could she string him along for enough time to get a story?

Could she live with herself if she did that?

She had been brought up in a family where lies—not outright lies but lies of omission—were routine. That was one of the main reasons she’d become a reporter—to expose the truth. So, no, she couldn’t lie to him or herself in hopes that she’d get a story without having to pay the price.

“I can’t do it,” she said. “I have to look myself in the mirror each morning.”

He crossed his arms over his broad chest, the sides of his jacket parting so she could see his dress shirt underneath it. This would be so much easier if she wasn’t tempted by him. If she didn’t want him.

But she knew that anything worth having was worth sacrificing for and she was just going to have to push on and stick to her guns. She’d meant what she said: She had to look at herself every morning and she couldn’t do that if she sold her body in exchange for an interview—even if it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

“Have you ever paid for an interview?” he asked her.

She sensed where he was going with this. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Answer the question,” he said in that forceful way of his.

“I’ll bet you were never spanked as a child,” she said.

“What makes you say that?” he asked.

“You are way too arrogant,” she replied. “Yes, I’ve paid a source for an interview.”

“Then how would this be different?”

“I get your point—I really do—but we’re talking about sex, and there has always been a stigma to paying for it or doing it in exchange for something.”

He nodded and leaned forward, putting his hands on either side of her chair so that she was now surrounded by him. His face was just inches from hers and she could see those thick dark lashes of his and the compelling blue of his gaze.

His masculine scent—clean, crisp and spicy—surrounded her. “If I asked you to hire painters to do the walls of this office in exchange for the interview, would you?”

She bit her lower lip. A part of her wanted him to talk her into this. That way she wouldn’t have to accept all the blame for the fallout—and she wasn’t about to fool herself that there wouldn’t be a fallout.

“Of course I would. But I wouldn’t just give in. Tell me something. Give me some information that is going to make it worth my while. Sweeten the pot for me,” she said.

“I want you.”

Those bald words sent a shiver down her spine and made her lean a little bit closer to him. She wanted him, too, but that wasn’t the issue. The issue was ethics and pride. She wanted him to want her enough not to make it a business deal.

She licked her lips and noticed that he tracked the movement with his eyes. His nostrils flared as he leaned in even closer and brushed his lips over hers. Just that touch of his mouth on hers sent a pulse of desire through her entire body.

She turned her head to the side. “I want you, too, but I’m not going to give in to physical desire.”

“That sounds like a challenge,” he said.

“You can try to make it one,” she said. “I need to talk about the interview. How about I agree to be your mistress after the interview is done?”

“How could I trust your word?”

She frowned at him. “I’m not known for lying.”

“Yet, the day we met you’d snuck into a party to which you weren’t invited,” he said, stepping back to lean against his desk again.

“True, but that wasn’t lying. No one asked to see my invitation.”

“Semantics. I want to know I can trust you and the only way I can be assured of that is if we are both giving up something we normally wouldn’t.”

“God, I’d hate to sit across the bargaining table from you,” she said.

He flashed a wicked smile. “I do win a lot, but mainly because I just don’t back down.”

“I stand my ground as well. How about a little friendly necking in exchange for an interview about the business and the reality TV show? I’ll forward you the article before it’s published and you can read it to see that I’m keeping my word.”

“I’m not interested in making out with you. I want the entire woman when I take you in my arms again. Nothing else is going to satisfy me.”

“Okay, we’re making progress here,” she said, crossing her legs again. “I have something you want very badly and I’m willing to negotiate with you for it. But you have to give a little ground here. What’s the bare minimum you are willing to take in exchange for an interview?”

“You bare naked on my desk for fifteen minutes and I’m allowed to do whatever I want to you,” he said.

She blushed. She should have been prepared for his brazen words, but she hadn’t been. “Um ... no. That’s not happening. I don’t have the kind of body that would stand up to that much scrutiny.”

“You look very fine to me,” he said.

She shook her head. Looking good with clothing on was way different than looking good naked, something she realized again and again when she got out of the shower and caught a glimpse of her out-of-shape body.

“Maybe you won’t be happy with what you see if I got naked,” she said.

“If I’m not satisfied, you still get your interview,” he said. “But I know that I’m going to enjoy every inch of you.”

She nibbled her bottom lip.

“Come on, red, you know you want to do it. Just give in and say yes, and everything you dreamed of can be yours.”

She wasn’t too sure she believed that, but a part of her wanted to. She wanted to put her faith in this man who didn’t believe in anything, but that seemed like the surest way to broken dreams and a broken heart as well. Because she knew she couldn’t separate her heart and soul from her body.

Three

Nichole wasn't a woman who ever veered from a path once she stepped on it. She'd decided to be a journalist and pursued it wholeheartedly. Not just in the workplace, but in her personal life. She'd made choices that kept her single and free to be the workaholic she was today.

She loved her life and didn't regret any of her decisions. But now ... she was tempted to make a big change. The kind of change she knew could potentially harm her and her career. She had to be very certain if she agreed to this arrangement with Conner that no one ever knew the details. And she had to be sure she could get her story and keep herself from falling for him.

A tall order. Not impossible exactly, but not easy, either. She just needed time to think and that was out of the question while she was with Conner.

"I can see that your method of negotiating is one of squeezing water from a stone, but I am not going to be pushed into accepting your position as the only one. I know that we can come to terms that will be suitable to both of us."

He walked back around his desk and took his seat again. "I've put all my cards on the table. I'm not going to budge."

"I don't see why not. I'm the one with everything to lose," she said, nibbling her lower lip. She was losing him and she didn't want to.

"Come on, you must see that talking about my personal life in any way isn't easy for me," he said.

She stared at him, feeling a pang of sympathy, remembering coverage of him as a teenager, and she started to soften toward him. But then she glanced up and met his gaze with her own and realized that he was playing her.

"That's not going to work. You're only going to let me see the side of you that you're comfortable with. We both know that you play your cards close to your chest."

"I do. And that's not going to change. Yet, you're an anomaly. I haven't wanted a woman as much as you in a long time, but that could be a danger in itself. I've made my offer and I'm not backing down. If you walk away, I'll probably always have a wistful what-if feeling toward you, but that's life."

She walked over to his desk, perching on the edge of it right next to where he was seated. Though he'd been glib and tried to play her, she knew that he was vulnerable as far as his father was concerned. He didn't want to answer any questions about the past, but she was already seeing how it had defined him.

"If I agree to keep the personal questions to a minimum and just use my own observations ..."

"No."

"Conner, you have to give a little."

"I already have," he said, reaching over to put his hand on her thigh.

He rubbed one long finger over the inside of her thigh, tracing a pattern that made sensations flow up her leg to the very core of her. She wanted this man. And all the justification she was trying desperately to find wasn't going to make a bit of difference. She simply wanted to stay. And that was the bottom line.

She could tell herself that she was after the story of a lifetime, but she knew her motivation was rooted in something much more primal.

"I am not going to write something that is scandal-ridden or sensationalized. I think that a lot of people are struggling with finding a mate in today's society, and I'd really like your take on that."

His hand skimmed down her thigh to her knee. She'd had no idea that it could be that sensitive. His touch was warm and brought her an intense awareness each time he moved his hand over her. She stood up and stepped away from him.

"I don't know that you are going to answer any of my questions."

“What do you want me to say?”

“Tell me something, give me a preview of what kind of story I’ll be getting so I know I’m not just giving in to your will at my own peril.”

He arched one eyebrow at her. “Your peril? That sounds very Victorian and just a tad melodramatic.”

“Dang, I was going for more than a tad,” she said with a grin. “But seriously ...”

“Seriously,” he said. “I decided to keep the matchmaking company for two reasons. The first is because it makes me a lot of money. And that’s really the only reason that counts. You can’t be a businessman in this economy and not give serious consideration to something that is keeping you solvent.”

“I agree,” she said. This was the kind of information she wanted. He was talking about matchmaking as if it were a widget being made in a factory, and to him it was. “What was your second reason?”

He leaned back in his leather chair and steepled his fingers over his chest. “I want to use it as a vetting tool for my friends. One of my cousins was the target of a gold digger and I hated what she did to him. I didn’t want to see anyone else in that situation. Given my own past with my father and the secrets that people keep in relationships, I think having a firm like Matchmakers, Inc. involved in setting up dates is the safest way for people to meet.”

She had gotten more from him than she had expected. “That is so cynical. A lot of people meet without doing a background check or having their likes and dislikes tallied and are actually happy with each other.”

“I’m willing to bet that they aren’t in my socioeconomic bracket. And I’m not saying that to be snooty. There is a different set of variables when you are talking about old money and family fortunes.”

“Tell me more about that,” she said.

“I’m afraid that’s where your sneak peek ends,” he said. “If you want any more material for your story, then you’re going to have to agree to be my mistress.”

She swallowed hard. He had given her just enough to make her want to ask more questions. Her instincts had been right in pursuing him. Conner had the potential to be a career-changing interview.

“What does being your mistress involve?” she asked.

Conner had barely given her any insights that he hadn’t shared with friends over the years and was relieved to see that it was enough for her. He understood what she wanted from him and he knew that there were lines he’d always been afraid to cross. Lines that he didn’t want to chance letting her know existed because Nichole had proven this morning in his office that she was more than equal to him.

She was willing to sacrifice to get the story and he knew that being in his bed wasn’t exactly a hardship. But he also knew that because he’d pushed her into this position he was asking her to do something that was hard for her.

“Being my mistress will involve a lot of pleasure,” he said.

She flushed. “I’m not asking for a rundown on what kind of sexual pleasures you will be pursuing with me. I mean, from a logistical standpoint, I have no idea what makes a woman a mistress.”

He had no idea, either. He’d never had a mistress before, though his friend, Alexander Montrose, did all the time. Alexander believed that money was at the root of all relationships and the only way to manage relationships was to make them business deals.

“You will move into my penthouse apartment here in the city and be available to me whenever I want you.”

“I have my own place and a job.”

“For the duration of our arrangement I’d want you to live with me. As you know, I’m the busy CEO of a huge multinational conglomerate, so even though I said you’d be available whenever I want you, we’re not talking every hour of the day. Though I think I would want to have you to myself for the first twenty-four hours so I can sate the hunger that has been riding me since I first laid eyes on you.”

His words were nothing less than the truth. He had to give Alexander props for the mistress thing. It was so much easier than dating. No coy games or subtleties—just full-on lust. He liked it. He didn’t expect to be keeping mistresses full-time in the future, but the more he thought about the idea, the more he liked it.

“I want you, too. What else?”

“I will pay your bills. I might need you to accompany me to a few social events, but given that you are writing an article about me perhaps we should keep that to a minimum?”

“Why? Reporters follow their subjects all the time,” she said. “But if I agree to this, I don’t want anyone to ever know about our arrangement. I think moving into your place would be a bad idea. There will be doormen and maids who will know I’ve stayed there.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“You can come to my house,” she said.

“You have neighbors, right? The risk of discovery is just as great. Perhaps you should just disclose that we are dating and let the cards fall where they may after that.”

“I’d have to ask my boss,” she said. “Actually, that sounds like the best option. Most people won’t guess that we have any other arrangement.”

“Exactly. A win-win. You get your story, I get your body and we both leave happy.”

She tipped her head to the side, staring at him askance. “Happy?”

“I think so,” he said. And he’d be in control of the article. He didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of this before.

“Okay, so I want two different stories from you. The first is strictly about the dating industry and your involvement with the venture. I’ll include the stuff you mentioned earlier about vetting gold diggers, that sort of thing.”

“Fine. That’s no problem at all,” he said, glancing at his calendar to see what would have to be moved so he could spend the rest of the day with Nichole. In her arms. It looked like the mistress deal was in the bag.

“The second story will be about the effect your father’s betrayal has had on your own dating habits and maybe your sister’s. I think it’s interesting that she is the home guru yet single.”

“No.”

“No? To what part?” she asked.

“All of it. I’m not talking about my father. I’m certainly not talking about Jane.”

“I want two stories,” she said.

“I will not talk about my private life,” he said. “There’s no merit to it other than gossip and you said you weren’t that type of reporter.”

“I’m not. I think it’s a human-interest story. There are readers out there who want to know what happened to you. They watched you grow up—”

“Too bad. I’m afraid that’s a deal breaker for me,” he said.

She retreated around the desk, back to the guest chair. He could tell her mind was going one hundred miles an hour trying to come up with something else to tempt him. But he knew the mistress deal was over. He wasn’t going to talk about his father—ever.

He never had and never wanted to. His father was nothing more than part of a past that Conner had already forgotten. “I think we’re through here.”

“Are we?” she asked. “I’m willing to settle for a different type of story.”

“The one on dating?” he asked.

“Definitely, but also one on you. Maybe as a corporate raider,” she said. “You have done some amazing things with failing companies.”

“Yes, I have. But that type of article is more suited to the business pages than the lifestyle section that you write for,” he said.

She sighed.

“What’s your decision, Nichole? Will you be satisfied with the one article from me in exchange for being my mistress?” he asked.

At this point it was all down to her. He’d live up to his end of the bargain, but he knew there were lines that he’d never allow her to cross. And seeing the way she interviewed him he knew that he’d have to be careful not to reveal too much. He also knew that he was playing a dangerous game by bringing her into his home because reporters were never really off the record.

She wouldn’t be satisfied with just one interview with him and one article. But she knew there was more than one way to get what she wanted. And for now it seemed that she should retreat and give this some thought.

It was easy to say that it didn’t matter to her if she slept with Conner in exchange for the information she needed. She was a sophisticated, new-millennium woman, but the truth of the matter was she was a bit old-fashioned. And though she often told her friends that she liked to keep her personal life light, so it didn’t interfere with her professional life, she knew that deep inside she was afraid to let anyone too close to her.

Living with Conner, even for only a month, would jeopardize that. She was afraid that once she saw what she’d been missing all these years, she might want more.

“I have to think this over,” she said. “It’s not a decision I can make easily.”

“I can respect that,” he said. “To be honest, I didn’t expect you to agree to it.”

“Then why did you make the offer?” she asked.

He shrugged. “There’s something about you that brings out impulsive instincts.”

“I feel the same way about you,” she said. He was different than other men. It wasn’t just the wealth and the upbringing that he’d had. It wasn’t just that she thought she’d known him from the background research she’d done. It was that she’d been surprised by how different he was than she’d expected.

He gave her a half smile that she was coming to realize was his only way of smiling. He didn’t give much away when it came to emotions. He’d admitted to wanting her, but that was lust and she suspected he’d put it down to chemistry. But his real feelings he kept buttoned up.

She glanced at her watch, surprised that she’d taken up thirty minutes of his time. It felt like she’d just arrived. That should be another warning to her. She wasn’t herself around him.

“I should be going. I’ll get back to you in a few days to let you know my decision.”

He stood up and came around his desk, holding his hand out to her. She took it in hers, realizing that although they’d kissed they’d never shook hands. Unsurprisingly, his handshake was firm, conveying confidence.

But it also made her want more. She wanted him to touch her as he had earlier on her leg. She couldn’t believe she was going to walk out the door when she wanted him as badly as she did.

“Are you sure I can’t change your mind?” he asked as he rubbed his thumb over the back of her knuckles.

“No, I’m not at all sure. But this seems like the kind of thing I really need to think about,” she said.

“Thinking is going to overcomplicate it. No one has to know what’s between us. How is it any different than a relationship?”

“The agreement. We’d both know that we aren’t just dating,” she said.

“It’s more of a commitment than most relationships.”

“Most of yours?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“How many dates do you usually have?” she asked. Thinking that she wanted to know personally, but also testing her theory that his father had damaged some relationship skills in Conner.

“Two. You?” he asked.

“Um ... about the same. I tend to seek out men who aren’t looking for anything long term.”

“Why?” He still held her, his thumb making those maddening circles on the back of her hand.

“My career. I don’t want anything to derail it.”

“Interesting that you are going to walk away from me and the interview that could rocket your career to the next level,” he said.

“It is interesting,” she said. “But I’m not sure that we’d be okay even if my boss knew we were dating. I can’t take a chance of losing everything that I’ve worked so hard for.”

She pulled her hand away. “I ... would you reconsider the one-kiss-to-one-question ratio?”

“Not for the long term,” he said.

She arched her eyebrow at him. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t want you to walk out that door without having one last kiss with you,” he said. “I know that once you get back to your office and have time to mull my offer over—you’ll more than likely decide I’m not worth the risk.”

She suspected by the way he’d worded it that he’d heard that at some time in his past. Was it only his father’s secret family that had soured Conner on relationships or was there more to it?

“I doubt I’d ever think you weren’t worth the risk,” she said impulsively.

“You already do. Or you wouldn’t be leaving,” he said.

“Touché,” she said. She wanted so much more than what he’d offered her. She saw in him a man she could invest herself in. He was a mass of contradictions and she knew that she shouldn’t take a chance on him. Shouldn’t let him into her heart and mind, but she was afraid it was too late.

“So one last kiss,” she said at last.

“Yes,” he said, pulling her off balance and into his arms.

Her handbag fell to her feet as she put her hands on his shoulders and looked up into that bluer-than-blue gaze of his. She let herself get lost in his eyes. Forgot that she’d come here for business, but was going to leave with only pleasure.

It was worth it. This little forbidden delight that was Conner Macafee and his kisses.

She leaned up toward him as his mouth slowly descended to hers. He was taking his time, she realized. He didn’t want this to end, either. And that made her like him a little more than she already did.

She tipped her head to the side as his mouth moved over hers. His hands caressed her back before settling on her waist and drawing her ever closer to him. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and drew her closer so they were chest-to-chest. Her nipples hardened as his tongue traced the seam between her lips.

Just that little touch made everything in her body clench as she moistened in her core. Her hands clutched his shoulders as he deepened the kiss. It was demanding and passionate and most of all it said goodbye.

Four

Conner felt more than a little regret as he held Nichole in his arms for what would probably be the last time, but he knew that he had to say goodbye to her. Though she stirred him as no one else had in a long time, she wasn't the right woman for him. And despite owning a matchmaking business, he wasn't even looking for someone.

Her lips under his were soft and her mouth tasted like the most exotic flavor he'd ever sampled. He was addicted to it, he thought, as he plunged his tongue deeper and deeper. He wanted to sate the hunger for her in this one kiss, but that didn't seem possible.

He craved more. Why didn't he just take what he wanted? It was clear that she wanted him, too, and though she was trying to use that desire as leverage to do a deal with him, in his arms she didn't seem to remember that she was a reporter.

He swept his hands down her back, lingering at the small span of her waist. He lifted her off her feet and held her against him, feeling her almost melt into him as all plans of deals went out of his mind. All he wanted was for this kiss to never end.

She clung to his shoulders and her breasts rested so softly against his chest. He took two steps backward so he could lean against his desk and continue to hold on to her. Her legs parted and she brushed against his erection as she wrapped those long legs of hers around his hips. He moaned deep in his throat and heard an answering mewling sound from her.

He slid his hands from her knees up to her thighs as he'd been longing to do since she'd walked into his office and perched so femininely in his guest chair. She moved against him, her legs moving around his hips to find purchase with her knees. But the position was awkward and he cupped her butt in both his hands and turned them so she was sitting on the edge of his desk and he was standing between her spread thighs.

The movement pulled their mouths apart and she braced her hands on the desk behind her, looking up at him with those wide, fathomless eyes of hers. Her lips were wet and glistening from his kisses and there was a pretty pink flush of desire on her neck and upper chest.

"One more kiss and then I'll ask my question," she said.

He nodded, not even listening to her words beyond ... *one more kiss*. He wanted their next kiss to end with him buried hilt-deep in her sexy body.

He lowered his head again and she started to lean up toward him, but he liked her spread out before him like a sexual offering and stopped her with a hand on her chest. "Stay like that."

"Like this?" she asked, leaning back on her elbows again.

"Yes," he said, his voice sounding guttural to his own ears.

He leaned down over her, taking his time, his hands slowly moving up from her waist to her breasts. He skimmed the edges of them at her side and then moved farther up, tracing the line of her collarbone and the skin underneath. "I love your freckles."

She scrunched her nose up at him. "I don't. They aren't sexy."

"On you they are," he said, lowering his head to lap at one of them. "Are they all over your body?"

He felt her skin heat under his hand and he glanced up, surprised that she was blushing. "Yes."

He growled as an image of her completely naked on his desk, covered only in those freckles, danced in his mind. He reached for the zipper at the side of her dress, but she stopped him with her hands on his and he realized he was in his office.

He stood up and started to walk away from her to cool down, but she pushed her fingers through his and drew his hand to her mouth where she kissed his palm. Then she lifted herself up into a sitting position.

She shifted forward, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, and the motion moved her feminine core against his hardening shaft. She lifted her free hand to his neck and urged his head down toward hers.

The next moment their lips met and once again he found that the only thing that mattered was Nichole and this moment. This time she didn't just let him devour her mouth, she was aggressive and passionate in the kiss as well—more of a participant this time. He felt her move his hand to her breast and then her hand fell away and he was cupping her through her bra and dress.

He had a realization that Nichole was bold and brash in her reporter mode, but the woman was a bit shier and softer. He liked that. He wanted to have that woman in his arms. But he knew that he could never separate the two.

This was goodbye and he needed to remember that. He wanted this complex woman, but these stolen moments in his office were all he was ever going to have.

He rubbed his forefinger over her breast as he plunged his tongue deep into her mouth and when he felt her nipple bud against his finger he concentrated his touch there. She shifted in his arms and then he felt the strong suck of her mouth on his tongue.

His hard-on strained against the front of his trousers and he used his other hand at her waist to draw her closer to him. He rubbed himself against her and felt her rock her hips against him.

He tipped his head to the side to take more of her mouth, wanting to see this through to climax. Nothing could stop them now. Their bodies knew what they wanted and now that they were touching their minds had stopped arguing for anything else.

He pulled the fabric away from her body and slipped one finger under to feel the softness of her skin.

There was a loud rap on the door and Conner stepped away from Nichole. He realized that he couldn't let his body take over. This was probably how his father had gotten into the mess he'd made of their lives.

"Just a minute," he called, turning back to see that Nichole was struggling to get up off the desk. There was a strong blush on her face and she looked unkempt. He gestured to his washroom. "Why don't you take a minute to repair the damage I did."

She nodded and walked across the room. As he watched her go, he knew that he'd had as much of Nichole as she could afford to give.

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