

Jennifer Crusie

Shannon Stacy

Victoria Dahl

be



mine

Victoria Dahl

**Be Mine: Sizzle / Too Fast
to Fall / Alone with You**

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Be Mine: Sizzle / Too Fast to Fall / Alone with You / V. Dahl —
«HarperCollins»,

Join bestselling authors Jennifer Crusie, Victoria Dahl and Shannon Stacey for three sexy stories about finding the one you love. *Sizzle* by Jennifer Crusie Business takes a backseat when successful ad executive Emily Tate meets Richard Parker. He's an accountant who's been sent to keep her in line and under budget in her ad campaign for a sensual new perfume called Sizzle. And if Emily's not careful, she could well melt in Richard's hands. *Too Fast to Fall* by Victoria Dahl For Eve Hill, working at an art gallery in Jackson Hole had its perks—the sexy owner being one of them. But the more she lusted after the unattainable man, the less possible their love seemed. Now, years later, her dream man is back...and this time, love is full of possibilities. *Alone With You* by Shannon Stacey When waitress Darcy Vaughan's friend asks her to help out with the launch of a fledgling restaurant, she's happy to oblige. Little does she know the owner is Jake Holland, the perfect guy who slipped through her fingers after their one night of passion. But for Darcy and Jake, just one touch was just not enough.

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Sizzle by Jennifer Crusie

Business takes a backseat when successful ad executive Emily Tate meets Richard Parker. He's an accountant who's been sent to keep her in line and under budget in her ad campaign for a sensual new perfume called Sizzle. And if Emily's not careful, she could well melt in Richard's hands.

Too Fast to Fall by Victoria Dahl

For Jenny Stone, driving is her escape—from her past, her problems, her quiet life in Jackson Hole. But after Deputy Nate Hendricks stops her—again—for speeding, she could lose more than just her license. She could lose her heart. Nate seems to think that Jenny should replace her love for fast driving with something even more...heart pumping. And despite her need for speed, Jenny's never been one for defying the law.

Alone With You by Shannon Stacey

When waitress Darcy Vaughan's friend asks her to help out with the launch of a fledgling restaurant, she's happy to oblige. Little does she know the owner is Jake Holland, the perfect guy who slipped through her fingers after their one night of passion. But for Darcy and Jake, one touch was just not enough.

Praise for the authors of

BE MINE

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Jennifer Crusie

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—People

“Few popular writers handle light romantic comedy as deftly as Jennifer Crusie.”

—Boston Globe on *Bet Me*

“Crusie seems incapable of writing a boring page, or one that's not aglow.”

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—New York Times bestselling author Nalini Singh

Be Mine

Jennifer Crusie

Victoria Dahl & Shannon Stacey



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SIZZLE

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who once told me that if I tried,
I could write anything.
So I did.

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CHAPTER ONE

“BUT, I DON’T WANT A partner,” Emily Tate said through her teeth. “I like working alone.” She clenched her fists to pound them on the desk in front of her and then unclenched them and smoothed down the jacket of her business suit, instead. “I don’t need a partner, George.”

Her boss looked exasperated, and she automatically put her hand to her hair to make sure every strand was in place, that no dark curls had escaped from her tight French twist. Be cool, calm and detached, she told herself. I want to kill him for this.

“Look, Em.” George tossed a folder across the table to her. “Those are the cost estimates from your Paradise project and the final costs after you brought the project in.”

Emily winced and clasped her hands in front of her. “I know. I went way over. But we still showed a mammoth profit. In fact, Paradise was the biggest money-maker Evadne Inc. has ever had. The bottom line, George, is that we made money for the company.” I made money for the company, she thought, but I can’t say that. Be modest and cooperative, Emily.

“Yeah, we did.” George Bartlett leaned back in his chair, looking up at her.

I hate it when he does that, Emily thought. He’s short, fat and balding, and he doesn’t have a quarter of my brains, but he’s the one leaning back in the chair while I stand at attention. I want to be the one leaning back in the chair. Except I wouldn’t. It would be rude. She sighed.

“Listen to me, Emily,” George said. “You almost lost your job over this last project.”

“You got a promotion because of this last project,” Emily said.

“Yeah, because of the profit. If it hadn’t made a profit, we’d have both been canned. Henry wasn’t happy.”

Henry Evadne was never happy, Emily thought. It didn’t have anything to do with her.

George leaned forward. “I don’t want to lose you, Emily. You’re smart, and you have a sixth sense about marketing that I’d kill to have. But you screw up the financial side on this next deal, and no profit is going to save you, no matter how big.”

Emily swallowed. “I’ll bring it in under budget.”

“You’re damn right you will, because you’ll be working with Richard Parker.”

“Who is Richard Parker?”

“He’s a whiz kid from the Coast,” George said. “He did an analysis of the Paradise project. It’s in the folder, too. You ought to read it. He wasn’t too complimentary.”

“George, how much have we made on Paradise?” Emily demanded.

George looked smug. “Close to four million as of last month.”

“Then why am I getting whiz kids from the Coast and nasty reviews in my project folders? Where’s the champagne?”

George shook his head. “You could have flopped.”

“I never flop.”

“Well, someday you will,” George said philosophically. “And when you do, you better flop under budget. Which is exactly what Richard Parker is here to guarantee. You’re meeting him at eleven in his office.”

“His office?”

“Next floor up,” George said with a grin. “Two doors from the president. Nice view from up there, I’m told.”

“Why not my office?”

“Emily, please.”

“Is he in charge of this project? Because if so, I quit.”

“No, no.” George waved his hands at her. “Just the financial end. And you’re not the only one he’s working with. He’s financial adviser for all our projects. It’s still your baby, Em. He just watches the spending.” He looked at her closely. She’d made her face a blank, but she knew the anger was still in her eyes. “Emily, please cooperate.”

“His office at eleven,” she said, clamping down on her rage.

“That’s it,” George said, relieved.

* * *

EMILY SLAMMED HER OFFICE door and slumped into her rolling desk chair. Jane, her secretary, followed her in more sedately and sat in the chair across from her. She broke a frozen almond Hershey bar in half and tossed the larger piece to her boss.

“I keep this in the coffee-room freezer for emergencies,” she said. “And I’ve given you the biggest half. Greater love hath no friend.”

“How do you keep people from stealing it?” Emily asked, pulling off the foil.

“They know I work for you,” Jane said. “They know I could send you after them.”

“No, really, how do you do it?”

“I keep it in a freezer container marked ‘Asparagus,’” Jane said, sucking on the chocolate.

“And nobody asks what you’re doing with asparagus at work?” Emily broke off a small piece of the chocolate and put it on her tongue. The richness spread through her mouth, and she sighed and sat back in her chair.

“They probably figure I keep it for you—you’re the type who looks like you only put fruits and vegetables in your body.” Jane studied her. “How come you never gain weight? We eat the same stuff, but I’m fighting ten extra pounds while you look like you’re losing. And you’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Frustration,” Emily said, breaking off another tiny piece. “I’m working for narrow-minded patriarchal creeps.”

“In the plural?” Jane finished her half and checked the foil for crumbs. “Did George clone himself?”

“Evidently,” Emily said. “I now have a budget adviser to answer to. Some suit named Richard Parker.”

“Oooh,” Jane said. “Him I’ve seen. Things are looking up.”

“Not a suit?”

“Oh, yeah, but what a suit. Too bad I’m happily married.” Jane sighed. “Tall. Dark. Handsome. Cheekbones. Chiseled lips. Blue eyes to die for. Never smiles. The secretaries are lining up to be seduced and so are the female junior execs, but it’s not happening.”

“No?” Emily broke off another piece of chocolate.

“He’s a workhorse. All he thinks about is finance. Karen says he’s always still here working when she leaves.”

“Karen?”

“That tiny little blonde on the twelfth floor. She’s his secretary now.”

“Make good friends with Karen. We need a spy in the enemy camp.”

“No problem,” Jane said, licking her fingers to get the last of her chocolate. “She looves to talk about the boss.”

“Good, good,” Emily said. “He could be a real problem for us.”

“How so?”

“He’s controlling the money.”

“And we’re not good with money.” Jane nodded wisely. “Good thing Paradise took off like it did. It’s been fun rising to the top with you, but I wasn’t looking forward to hitting the bottom together when we went sailing over the budget.”

“You wouldn’t have hit bottom,” Emily said. “George isn’t dumb. He’d steal you as his own secretary.”

“I’m not dumb, either,” Jane said. “You and I stay together. I knew when I met you in high school that you were going places and taking me with you. President and secretary of the senior class. President and secretary of student council. President and secretary of our sorority in college. I’m hanging around until you make president of this dump.” She threw her foil away and smiled smugly. “I’ve already made secretary.”

“You’re every bit as smart as I am,” Emily said. “Why don’t you let me get you into an executive-training program?”

“Because I’m smarter than you are,” Jane said. “I’m making more than most executives here right now, and I don’t have to kiss up to the boss. Are you going to eat the rest of that chocolate?”

“Yes,” Emily said.

“So I gather you slammed the door in honor of Richard Parker?”

“Yes.”

“I know how you can handle Richard Parker.”

“How?” Emily broke off another piece of chocolate. She wasn’t interested in handling Richard Parker. She wanted, in fact, to eliminate him, but she was always interested in Jane. She didn’t insist that the company pay Jane a lavish salary just because they were friends; she insisted because Jane had a lot of ideas and none of them were dumb. If Emily did get to be president, it would be due as much to Jane’s brains as to Emily’s.

“I think you should seduce him,” Jane said.

Emily reconsidered her thoughts about Jane not having dumb ideas. This seemed to be one.

“Why?”

“Because you need to get out more. You live in the office. You only stop by your apartment to shower and change. You don’t even have a pet, for crying out loud. I’m your only companionship.”

“I like it that way.”

“Well, it’s not natural. And it sounds like Parker is the same way. You could save each other. He’ll be grateful and fall in love with you, you’ll get married, and I’ll get to buy baby gifts, instead of accepting them from you. You’re not going to eat that chocolate, are you?”

“Yes,” Emily said, breaking off another piece. “How will marrying Richard Parker help me?”

“Sex always helps,” Jane said. “It’s like chocolate.”

“I need help at the office,” Emily said. “This guy is going to tie my hands.”

“Kinky.”

“Be nice to Karen,” Emily said. “This could get very dirty. Now go get Parker on the phone. I have an eleven-o’clock meeting with him, and I want to hear what he sounds like first.”

“A meeting, huh? Why don’t you change your look? Let that long dark hair down. Take off your suit jacket. Especially take off your glasses. You look like a bug.”

“I want to look like a bug. I have a hard enough time getting respect around here looking like a bug. If I start taking off my clothes, no one will pay attention.”

“Want to bet?” Jane looked at her boss. “If I had your body, I’d take off my clothes all the time.”

“You do take off your clothes all the time,” Emily pointed out. “Has Ben ever seen you clothed?”

“Certainly,” Jane said. “I was dressed for my wedding. You were there. You slapped the best man at the reception.”

“You never forget, do you?”

Jane got up and headed for the door. “I’ll get Parker. Don’t slap him. I’ll make friends with Karen, but we’ll get further if you seduce the guy.”

“Feel free to sacrifice my body for your ambitions,” Emily said as Jane went through the door.

“Our ambitions,” Jane said. “And I’ve seen him. It would be no sacrifice.”

* * *

“MR. PARKER ON LINE TWO,” Jane said in her secretary voice.

Emily picked up the phone. “Mr. Parker?”

“Yes?”

“This is Emily Tate. I understand we have a meeting at eleven.”

“Yes, Ms. Tate, we do.” He sounded bored but patient. She’d been expecting the high tight tones of a monomaniac; his voice was deep with a little bit of New York rhythm in it.

“Is there anything you’d like me to bring to the meeting?”

“No, Ms. Tate, I have everything I need. Is there anything else?”

Sorry, Emily thought. Taking up your time, am I? “No, Mr. Parker, there’s nothing else.”

“Eleven, then,” he said, and hung up.

Not good, Emily thought. Efficient and not impressed with her in spite of her terrific track record. Which must mean he was still hung up on the budget overruns.

Jane poked her head in. “Okay, so he’s not a charmer. But I still say go for it. Maybe he loosens up in bed.”

“Not a chance.” Emily hung up the phone. “He probably doesn’t go to bed. He probably sleeps standing up in a corner of his office.”

“Do you need me in the meeting to take notes?”

“No. Do you want to take notes?”

“Yes.”

“Then come along, sweetie, and we’ll have lunch at the Celestial afterward. We can discuss the situation.”

“Good idea.”

“And, Jane, try to pretend you’re really a secretary in there. He doesn’t need to know you’re the brains of our outfit.”

“I’ll stick a pencil through my bun and borrow your glasses,” Jane said.

“What bun?”

“I’ll have one by eleven.”

“This I’ve got to see.”

* * *

WHEN EMILY LEFT THE OFFICE at five to eleven, Jane really had pulled her hair into a bun. It was a terrible bun, with wisps of hair escaping and two pencils jabbed through it, but it was indisputably a bun.

“That’s really disgusting,” Emily said as they waited for the elevator.

“Wait.” Jane lifted Emily’s glasses off her nose and put them on. “How do I look?”

“You look like a bug with a very bad hairdo,” Emily said. “You look like Norman Bates’s mother as a young mental patient. You look like—”

The elevator doors opened, and they got on with several other executives. Emily glanced sideways at Jane and tried not to laugh. If things got really bad, she’d just look at Jane and feel better.

“It’s a good thing there’s only going to be the three of us in this meeting,” Emily whispered. “Anybody else would know you were up to something.”

Jane pushed the glasses up the bridge of her nose, sniffed and said loudly and nasally, “I just want you to know, Ms. Tate, that it is an honor and a privilege to work for you, and I really mean that from the bottom of my heart.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Frobish,” Emily said. “Your loyalty is heartwarming.”

“Do you have any of your chocolate left?”

“No.”

Jane sniffed.

The conference room was across from the elevator. Once inside, Emily realized she’d made a mistake. It wasn’t going to be just the three of them. There were six other executives in there, four of whom had brought their secretaries.

“What is this?” Emily whispered to Jane, frowning.

“I don’t know,” Jane whispered, “but I’m glad I’m here.”

“I am, too,” Emily whispered. “Guard my back.”

The door at the other end of the conference room opened, and Richard Parker came in, tall, dark and serious. And indisputably the best-looking man Emily had ever seen. Distinguished. Beautifully dressed. Powerful. And sexy, Emily thought. Definitely sexy. Every executive there except Emily stiffened in his or her seat. Every secretary there except Jane smiled warmly. For everyone there, Richard Parker radiated power and authority. For the secretaries and female execs, he also radiated sex appeal. The power and the authority were conscious, Emily decided; the sex appeal wasn’t.

He really is extraordinarily good-looking, Emily thought. Except for his height and that jaw, he’s almost pretty. Those electric blue eyes and long dark lashes. Not businesslike. How can I make that work against him? If he was female, it’d work against him.

His eyes swept the room and caught hers. She was the only one not looking at him with fear or lust. She met his eyes coolly and stared back at him, calculating. He was the enemy.

He raised his eyebrows at her and moved his gaze on. Jane made a note. Emily looked at her pad. “He’s not stupid,” Jane had written, “but you can take him.”

Emily shook her head. Jane’s one weakness was overestimating her.

George leaned over to Emily. “What’s wrong with Jane? She looks funny.”

“PMS,” Emily whispered back, and George nodded solemnly.

Richard Parker looked up and frowned at them.

George blushed.

Emily raised her eyebrows at Parker.

He looked startled, and then his lips twitched.

Almost smiled there, didn’t we? Emily thought. You’re not so tough. Maybe I can take you.

“I’ve asked you to meet with me today to discuss your past performance in budgeting your marketing campaigns,” Parker began. “It’s abysmal.”

Several of the executives tittered and then fell silent. A few colored and looked away. Emily yawned and checked her watch.

“Am I boring you, Ms. Tate?” Parker asked.

“Not at all.” Emily smiled back politely. “I’m sure you’ll make your point soon.”

George closed his eyes.

“The point, Ms. Tate,” Parker said without raising his voice, “is that you all regularly exceed your budgets, thereby cutting into the profits this company could be making. You alone went over your budget on the Paradise account by almost thirty percent. That’s a lot of money, Ms. Tate. You may have thought there was no price too great to pay for Paradise, but I don’t agree. You could have cost this company a fortune.”

Emily smiled at him again.

“I could have, but I didn’t, Mr. Parker,” Emily said. “I made four million dollars for this company by having the guts to go thirty percent over budget.”

“That doesn’t take guts, Ms. Tate. That just takes lack of control. That’s where I come in. I’m your control.” Parker’s eyes swept the room. “From now on all budgets go through me. So do all purchase orders, all payments. I’m the money pipeline. I’ll make sure you get the money you need for your projects. And I’ll make certain you stay within your budgets. Now, I’m sure you have questions about how this new procedure will operate, so let’s get started.”

He sat down and leaned back in his chair while the others began a process of hemming and hawing and assuring Parker that they appreciated his help and were anxious to work with him.

Jane wrote on her pad, “Don’t antagonize him.”

Emily fumed, although she kept her face a mask. No price too great to pay for Paradise. Don’t get snide with me, buddy, she thought. I didn’t get where I am today taking that from anybody.

And then she thought, yes, I did. I’m modest, cooperative and polite, and I regularly back down. I back down in front of George, who is an idiot, all the time. Then Jane and I sneak around behind his back and get things done the way we want. What am I doing confronting this guy?

She watched him listening to Croswell from Research and Development. He was listening politely and nodding, and she wanted to throw something.

He patronized me, she thought. He assumed he was right, and he didn’t listen, and he patronized me. He thinks I’m insignificant.

Boy, is he going to pay for that.

I don’t care how good-looking he is.

Without realizing it, she’d let her eyes narrow as she looked at him, so that when he gazed idly around while he listened to Croswell’s drivel, he saw her look of undiluted antagonism. His eyes widened slightly, and then he grinned at her as if he was seeing her for the first time, a real smile that accepted her challenge and recognized her as an equal, sharing the absurdity of the moment and of his own new-kid-on-the-block power play.

It was a killer smile.

Emily narrowed her eyes even more. It’s going to take more than a smile, buddy boy. Hit me with another line like “no price too great for Paradise,” and I’ll wipe that smile off your face so fast you won’t know what hit you.

Jane nudged her and she looked down at the pad. It said, “Why is he smiling?”

Emily took the pad languidly and wrote, “Because he knows I’m angry, and he thinks it’s amusing.”

Jane took the pad back and wrote, “Then he’s not as smart as I thought.”

Emily nodded and turned her attention politely back to the group.

“Any other questions?” Parker surveyed the table before turning to Emily. “Ms. Tate, you’ve been very quiet. Do you have any questions?”

“No, I’ve found out all I need to know,” she said calmly.

“Good. Do you have time to meet with me now?”

“Now?” Emily raised her eyebrows. “I have a lunch meeting. I could possibly meet with you at two.”

“Let me check my appointments,” he said. “I’ll have my secretary call yours.” He looked at Jane for the first time and stopped.

What is she doing? Emily thought, not daring to look. She's probably blacked out a couple of teeth and is now grinning maniacally at him.

"Fine." Emily stood so that she blocked Jane. "Anything else?"

He stayed seated, watching her. "No. There's nothing else."

"Thank you," Emily said, and left with Jane clumping in her wake.

When the door closed behind them, Jane stopped clumping and took off her glasses. "That was dumb," she said flatly. "We get nothing by antagonizing him. What's wrong with you?"

"He's arrogant," Emily said, punching the elevator button.

"Everybody in that room's arrogant," Jane said. "The only difference is that he has reason to be."

"What? You've fallen for that 'hello, I'm God' presentation he just did?"

"He's right," Jane said. "We were over budget. We could have done the campaign for less. He could help you here."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Ours," Jane said. "First, last and always. I'm just not sure he's not on our side, too."

They got on the elevator, and Jane handed the glasses back to Emily. "He likes you."

"Please."

"He likes you. I saw his eyes. Which are incredible, by the way. He likes watching you. He thought you were cute."

"Cute!" Emily exploded. "Cute!"

"Make it work for you," Jane said.

"The hell I will. I'll give him cute." Emily stormed off the elevator and down the hall to her office, slamming the door behind her. A minute later, Jane came in with her coat.

"Your lunch meeting is here," she said. "You promised me Chinese."

* * *

"YOU'D HAVE TO DO THE new campaign for less, anyway," Jane said later over potstickers and sizzling rice soup. "The new stuff's not as expensive as Paradise. Your profit margin's lower."

"Not necessarily." Emily spooned the hot soup carefully into her mouth. "We'll sell more—to the younger woman who uses perfume more frequently. We'll be fine. If I'm not forced to under budget."

"Give him a chance," Jane said. "There's no point in firing the first shot."

"I haven't," Emily said. "I've just made it clear that I'll return fire."

Jane gave up for the time being. "Garlic chicken?"

"Not if I'm meeting with Attila the Budget Hun this afternoon. Did Karen call?"

"Yep. Two o'clock. His office."

"Of course." Emily sighed. "I'd prefer neutral ground. From now on let's make it the conference room. On our floor, not his."

"I'll try," Jane said. "Prawns?"

"Yes," Emily said. "I'm in the mood to crunch little backbones."

"Then we'll go shopping," Jane said. "I found this incredible pink lace bra and bikini—" She stopped and looked past Emily.

"Ladies."

It was the Hun with George in tow. George would bring him here, Emily thought. Showing the new boss the best place to eat. I'll bet he offers to pick up his dry cleaning later. She looked up and smiled tightly. "Mr. Parker. How nice to see you."

"George assures me this is an excellent place to have a lunch meeting." He looked at Jane.

"It is." Emily turned her back and began spooning soup again.

Jane grinned at him. "Lovely meeting you again."

"Oh, yes. You're Ms. Tate's secretary. Mrs. Frobish, isn't it? I didn't recognize you at first."

“Well, that’s the lot of the secretary,” Jane said cheerfully. “Unrecognized, unrewarded, underpaid...”

“Hardly underpaid,” Parker said. “Your salary is part of the budget, you know. It’s very generous.”

“Actually,” Emily said, staring straight ahead, “she is underpaid. And I shall fight tooth and nail to stop any attempt to reduce her salary or to curtail her future raises.” She raised her eyes to Parker’s, and the steel in her voice was also in her eyes.

“I have no intention of interfering with Mrs. Frobish’s salary,” Parker said, calmly. “A good secretary is worth her weight in gold.”

“Good idea,” Jane said. “I’ll take that as a basis for my next raise. Let’s have two orders of prawns now that I have a reason to gain weight.”

Emily thought about stabbing Parker with her fork but decided it would be too overt. Subtlety is the key here, she thought.

“I’ll see you at two, Ms. Tate,” Parker said, and moved on to the table the waiter was patiently holding for him, George toddling along in his wake.

“I thought you were going to stab him with your fork,” Jane said. “Bad move, careerwise, although as your friend I would have been touched.”

“I’ve got to stop hating him.” Emily stabbed an egg roll instead. “I’ve got to work with this overbearing, egotistical control freak.”

“See?” Jane said. “Already you’re speaking of him with warmth.”

* * *

THE UNDERWEAR WAS made of hot-pink lace embroidered with silver thread, and Jane bought it. The bra was just two large pink lace roses stitched into demi-cups, held in place with tiny pink satin ribbons, and the bikini was a strip of the same roses and ribbons. It was silly and luxurious and sexy and fun.

“Ben is going to love this,” Jane said. “Why don’t you get some and try it on Richard?”

“Richard who?”

“Parker,” Jane said patiently.

“He’d never go for it.” Emily looked at the price tag. “It’s not cost-effective. There are small countries that don’t spend this much for defense.”

“Defense is not what I have in mind.” Jane looked at herself in the mirror. “I’m planning on surrendering almost immediately and being invaded shortly thereafter.”

Emily sighed. “Sounds like fun.”

Jane pounced. “You buy some, too.”

“Why? There’s no one interested in invading.”

“Wrong. Crosswell down in R & D still speaks of you with passion.”

“Crosswell was a mistake.” Emily picked up a pink-and-silver lace bra and looked at it longingly. “If he tries to invade, I’m defending.”

“Then go back to plan A. Richard.”

Emily looked at the pink-and-silver lace and thought of Richard Parker. If he’d just keep his mouth shut, she thought, I could stand it. In fact, I’d be very interested. That long lovely body. Those crazy blue eyes. That classic, chiseled, supple mouth.

That mouth. The one that kept opening and accepting his expensively shod foot. “No price too great to pay for Paradise.”

“Hardly underpaid.”

“Not even if he was unconscious.” Emily put the underwear back. “Let’s go. I have a meeting at two.”

* * *

“I’VE LOOKED AT YOUR preliminary ideas,” Richard the Hun said. “You’re not being cost-effective.”

“Already?” Emily tried to stay calm. “I’ve barely started.”

“Rubies.” He tossed a folder across the table to her.

“Look, we marketed Paradise with diamonds. Very classy stone. But this new stuff is for a younger hotter market. So rubies. Still classy, but hotter.”

“Fine.” He shrugged. “Use paste.”

“This is for photographs.” Emily folded her hands calmly and clenched them until her knuckles went white. “We’re not studding the bottles with them.”

“Can you rent them?”

“Loose stones? I don’t know.” Emily tried to consider it, but she was against it. “We might be able to buy and resell. I don’t know much about gemstones.”

“Well, I know a little, and what you’re suggesting would tie up half your budget.”

“Gems are a good investment.” Emily deliberately unclenched her hands. “We wouldn’t lose money.”

He shook his head. “We’re not in the gem-investment business. Rent them.”

Emily shook her head. “We might need the same stones back again for later pictures. We couldn’t be sure we’d get them. Plus, we often use them in special displays at openings and benefits. We did this with Paradise, and it was very successful.”

He leaned back in his desk chair and looked at her steadily.

“Are you really serious about this, or is this just something you’re going to fight me on?”

Hasn’t he been listening to me? Emily thought. Do I sound like I’m playing games? “I’m serious. And I never fight just for the sake of fighting.”

“That was a business lunch today?”

“Jane knows more about this company than you or I do.” Emily clenched her hands again. “When you’ve been here a little longer, you’ll know that. I consult with her often, and I value her opinions highly. So, yes, that really was a business lunch.”

“Pink lace underwear?” He smiled at her dryly.

He would overhear that comment, she thought. Emily smiled back sweetly. “I told her you wouldn’t think it was cost-effective.”

“I don’t look at everything in terms of cost, Ms. Tate.” His eyes dropped almost involuntarily to the open collar of her blouse.

Emily raised her eyebrows at him, and he flushed. He looked good flushed. What do you know, she thought. He’s human. There may be hope. “I’m sure you don’t, Mr. Parker. And I’m hoping you’ll see that in the case of the rubies, cost-effectiveness simply doesn’t apply. We’re selling emotions here, the sizzle not the steak.” She leaned across the desk to him, suddenly earnest, trying to convince him. “You can’t sizzle with paste, Richard. You need the real thing.”

His eyes had widened a little at her use of his name.

“All right.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll take it under consideration. Now, the next item...”

Emily worked with him for another hour, politely agreeing on a few things she didn’t care about, anyway, leaving the others open for further discussion, trying to build a foundation of compromise so that when she came back for real money, for rubies and whatever else she wanted, he’d be used to negotiating with her, not flatly dismissing her. From the look in his eyes, he had a fairly good idea of what she was doing, but he was patient with her. Toward the end, Emily realized her plan wasn’t working; any compromising had been done by her, not him. Richard liked saying no or yes and moving on.

When she stood up to go, Richard pushed back his chair and stood, too. “We’ll have to meet again. We haven’t accomplished much.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Emily tried to smile warmly but her lips were tight. “I think we’ve established a very creditable working relationship.” She held out her hand. “Please call Jane if you need any information. She knows exactly what’s going on.”

He took her hand and held it for a moment, and she tried to ignore the warmth he generated there. “I’d rather talk to you. I like to go straight to the person in charge.”

“Then definitely talk to Jane.” Emily pulled her hand away. “She’s been running my life since high school.”

“I thought I sensed a lot more there than just boss-and-secretary.” He came around the desk and walked her to the door.

“We’re partners.”

“I envy you. I’ve always worked alone.” He stopped by the door. “Would you consider having dinner with me tonight? To go over some of these points again? Maybe in a...warmer atmosphere, we could get closer on some of these disagreements.”

He smiled down at her, and Emily was caught off guard, her knees going to jelly while she frantically tried to gather her thoughts under the wattage of that suddenly sweet, boyishly endearing, sexy smile.

He’s a Hun, she told herself. Unless you want to be invaded, turn back now.

“Sorry,” she croaked. “I have a dinner engagement.”

“Jane again?”

“Oh, no. Jane goes home to a husband and three lovely children.”

“And you?”

“I go home to cost-effectiveness reports.” Emily opened the door. “I have a very tough budget adviser.”

She didn’t turn around as she walked down the hall, but she could feel him watching her all the way to the elevator.

“How did it go?” Jane asked, following her into the office.

“Not well, but not badly, either.” Emily kicked off her shoes. “I really hate panty hose. They itch.”

“Back to Richard,” Jane said firmly. “What happened?”

“I tried to compromise. He told me what to do. He likes telling people what to do. He listened part of the time. At one point, he looked down my blouse and blushed. He asked me to dinner.”

“Wear something sexy.”

“I’m not going. I told him I had a previous engagement. He thought it was with you, but I told him you were happily married. That’s about it.”

“Go out with him.” Jane sat down and folded her arms on Emily’s desk. “Sleep with him.”

“Sell my body for a perfume campaign?” Emily shook her head. “Not likely.”

“No.” Jane leaned back, disgusted with her. “The hell with the perfume campaign. Share your body for a wonderful experience. He looks like a wonderful experience. Did you see his hands?”

Emily frowned. “I must have, but I didn’t pay attention.”

“He has great hands. And he’s really very charming. He’s a little obsessive about getting his own way, but he’s not a Hun.”

“No.”

“Listen, Em.” Jane leaned over the desk again and caught Emily’s hand. “I’m worried about you. You haven’t had a serious relationship since you dumped that fool Crosswell in R & D. That was two years ago. You’re not getting any younger. You’re obsessive about your work, and that’s not going to change. You’ve just met a truly beautiful man who is also obsessive about his work, but who has focused his eyes on you long enough to ask you to dinner. You could build a life as obsessive executives together. You could have great obsessive sex together. You could have little obsessive

children in suits together. This is the man for you. Go buy that pink lace bra and seduce this guy before you're too old to wear pink lace."

"I will never be too old to wear pink lace," Emily said.

"Are you wearing any now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have anything sexy or fun in your whole wardrobe?"

"I have some white lace. Sort of."

"You may already be too old to wear pink lace. Mentally you're already in gray flannel long johns."

Emily sighed and thought about what Jane was saying because she always thought about what Jane was saying. Then she shook her head. "I could never be serious about somebody who told me what to do all the time. Telling people what to do is this guy's reason for living."

"So change him." Jane leaned back again. "He has one tiny fault and the rest of him is perfect. Teach him not to boss you around."

"Maybe." Emily thought about it.

"That's a start." Jane got up to go. "Keep an open mind. I bet he can make love like crazy."

Change him, Emily thought. No, better yet, change me. I'm in this position because I'm modest, cooperative and polite. Because I'm modest, cooperative and polite, I'm working for a vain, obstructive, rude man like George. And as if George wasn't enough, now I have Richard Parker, the Budget Hun.

A Hun who can make my knees go weak when he smiles, dammit.

Well, no more of that, she told herself. I'm tired of being told what to do. Starting tomorrow, Richard Parker treats me like a partner, not a slave. Starting tomorrow, I am going to make that man listen to me.

And starting tomorrow, my knees are going to stiffen up, too.

CHAPTER TWO

"THAT MAN IS GOING to listen to me," Emily told Jane the next morning. "I am going to be courteous and cooperative, but still forceful and demanding."

"This should be interesting." Jane looked skeptical.

"I will stun him with my competence." Emily stuck out her chin. "I will keep an open mind."

And during the week that followed, Emily did her best, but she was doomed. Richard kept ordering her to send him files, ordering her to meet him for meetings and ordering her to arrange conferences until she was ready to throw the whole campaign in his face. When she came into the office on Friday morning and Jane told her that Richard wanted her in the conference room, she broke.

"Too damn bad!" She slammed her briefcase down on her desk. "I have things to do."

"Courteous and cooperative." Jane handed her a folder. "Here's his cost estimates. You won't like them. I think it's showdown time. Be nice to him, but let him know he can't dictate to you. You know, forceful and demanding."

"What happened to marry him and be obsessive together?"

"You can do both. Hey, I did the same thing with Ben. I was nice to him, but I let him know he couldn't dictate to me."

"Ben never dictates to you."

"See?" Jane grinned at her. "It works."

* * *

EMILY WAS RUNNING DOWN his cost estimates when Richard met her in the conference room.

"Here." He tossed a small black bottle at her. "Put some of this on."

She caught it and glared at him.

“It’s the product.” He dropped some folders onto the table and sat down, opening one. “Let’s see what it smells like.”

The hell with you, Emily thought. She held it out to him. “You put it on. We’ll see what it smells like on you.”

“I tried it last night.” He sorted through the folder without looking at her. “It took me two showers to get it all off before I came to work.”

“Then you know what it smells like.” She put the bottle on the table and returned her attention to the estimates.

“Put it on.” He pulled a legal pad for notes out of his briefcase. “See what you think.” He looked over at her for the first time and waited for her reaction.

Courteous and cooperative.

Emily sighed and pulled the stopper out of the bottle, putting her fingers over the opening and flipping the bottle over to release a few drops. She tapped the drops behind her ears and on her wrists, then replaced the stopper. “It’s nice.” She picked up the estimate report again.

“Just nice?” he asked.

“I’m not much for perfume,” she said, and he laughed.

“You’re responsible for selling four million dollars’ worth of perfume. I should think you’d be interested.”

“Look.” Emily dropped the report, exasperated. “If you got a job selling tampons tomorrow, you’d work hard so you’d be successful, right? Even though you personally aren’t much interested in tampons?”

Richard lost his smile, taken aback by her intensity. “Well, yes. Why are you so angry?”

“Because you’re treating me as if I were an amusing child.” Emily folded her hands in front of her, clenching them to keep her temper. “An amusing female child. That crack you made at the meeting, about ‘no price too great to pay for Paradise’ being my motto was insulting. You would never have made it to a male executive. And now telling me to wear the perfume. Would you ask George to wear it?”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not. He’s never smelled it, either.”

Richard looked uncomfortable. “George isn’t part of our team.”

“Throwing a bottle of perfume at someone and ordering her to wear it is not teamwork!” Emily snapped. “It’s not a team. It’s a boss and a flunky, and I am nobody’s flunky. I told you I wouldn’t put on that perfume, and you simply ordered me to put it on again. You give me orders, and you never listen to me. This is not a partnership. This is not teamwork. I don’t need this.” She slammed her portfolio closed and stood up.

“You’re right,” Richard said.

She stopped and glared at him, and he rubbed his hand over the back of his head and smiled at her ruefully. At that moment, he looked more like a boy than a man, sheepish and apologetic. It was devastatingly effective.

“I’m used to being the boss.” His eyes pleaded with her. “I’m sorry.”

Emily sat down again. It would be a whole lot easier to stay mad at him if he wasn’t so damn charming, she told herself. That smile must get him a lot. She opened her portfolio. “All right, then, listen. Our main problem with this product is that we have to distinguish it from Paradise. And that’s going to take more than a different name. More than just switching from diamonds to rubies. And it’s so important that anything we can do to make the difference clear to the consumer will be worth extra money in the long run.”

Richard pulled the cap from his pen, prepared to listen so hard he’d take notes. “All right, how is it different?”

“It’s cheaper. But it would be suicide to market it that way.”

“Granted.” He was still trying to cooperate. “Does it smell different from Paradise?”

“Of course.” She unstopped the bottle again. “It’s spicier, sharper. Paradise was heavier, fruitier. We marketed Paradise as a slow, languid, sexy scent.” Emily waved the stopper in front of her to smell the scent in the air. “This stuff has more of an edge. We could try for a more exciting approach, I suppose.”

She touched the stopper to the back of her hand and sniffed. “It definitely has an edge.” She frowned as she replaced the stopper in the bottle and flipped the bottle upside down to moisten it. Then she absentmindedly touched the stopper to the hollow at the base of her throat. “It’s just as sexy as Paradise, really. Just different.” She moved the stopper down into the V of her blouse, stroking it between her breasts.

Richard watched her, fascinated.

“It will be a while before the scent is true,” she told him. “It needs to be warmed by my skin.”

“Oh.” He swallowed. “Fine.”

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t know much about perfume,” she said to reassure him. “We just sell the sizzle, not the steak, remember?”

“Right.” Richard cleared his throat. “Does this perfume have sizzle?”

Emily rubbed the silk of her blouse against the skin between her breasts to release more scent and wriggled her nose as it floated up to her. “Yes. Actually, this is pretty good stuff.”

He cleared his throat again. “So, uh, how would you base the campaign?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “we marketed Paradise as sex—you know, the heavy, filled feeling you get when—”

“Right.” He nodded. “I know.”

“This stuff is more like...foreplay. You know, exciting and edgy.”

“Foreplay.”

“I wonder if this stuff builds the longer it’s on. We could tie that to sexual excitement. Then we could direct this to a younger, faster customer. If Paradise was classy sex, this stuff could be kinky sex.” She saw his eyebrows go up. “Well, not whips and chains, but still...sizzle. I wonder...”

She unstopped the bottle and slid the black crystal stopper into the V of her blouse again.

He turned away. “Will you stop that?”

“Sorry. I know. Too much perfume can make you gag. I just had an idea...”

“What?”

She leaned forward across the table, and she saw his eyes drop to the V of her blouse. “I’m sorry about the perfume. I’ll wash it off, but listen. Suppose we put something in this stuff to make it really sizzle?”

“Sizzle?”

“You know.” She frowned in frustration. “Tingle. Only with heat. A woman wears perfume on the warmest parts of her body—the pulse points. Suppose when she touched the perfume to those places she felt a subtle heat and tingle. It would make her feel excited. Exciting. It would feel like...”

“Foreplay.” Richard grinned, taking Emily’s breath away for a moment. “Well, you’ve got my attention.”

She smiled back, taken with her new idea. “We could call it Sizzle. We’ll get it a product placement in the next really hot movie, something with an electric sex scene. We can package samples with other sexy products for women...”

“Such as?”

“Seamed hose, lace garter belts...” She broke off when she saw him laughing. She sat back and gritted her teeth. “You don’t like the idea?”

“No, no. It’s great. It’s just you. You’re so intense, talking about lace underwear.”

“My intensity is what makes me a success,” she said evenly. “You’d take this perfume, call it ‘Night in the Boardroom’ and sell three bottles of it.”

“Probably,” Richard agreed.

“So don’t patronize me.” Emily looked him straight in the eye. “I don’t deserve it.”

“I apologize again.” He leaned toward her, sincerely sorry. “I really do. Listen, let me make it up to you. Let me take you to dinner tonight.” He smiled, and she lost her breath again.

“Come on, Emily.” Richard coaxed her with his eyes. He had amazing eyes. “You’ve got all that perfume on—you really should go somewhere in it.”

He has eyes like the sky, she thought. I love the way he says my name. And then she thought, no. I don’t need this. I don’t even like him.

“Please.” He smiled that earnest killer smile at her.

Don’t do that, she thought.

“Strictly business. We can talk about the account. About seven?”

I really don’t like him, smile or no smile, but I bet he has a great body under that suit. Not that it matters. “All right.” Emily took a deep breath. “If it’s all right with you, I’ll send a memo to the lab and to the advertising people on this.”

“Fine.” Richard sat back and picked up his notes, obviously pleased she’d agreed, the human in him fast receding behind the businessman. “Although we’ll probably have to scale down some of your ideas.”

“Which ones?” Emily asked coldly.

He was back into his reports and he didn’t hear the chill. “Well, the product placement will be a fortune. We’ll reach more people with print.”

“But not the same way.” Emily leaned forward. “In a movie, they’ll see someone beautiful stroke herself with the perfume, use the stuff against her skin and then go out and have incredible sex with some gorgeous guy. If we get really lucky,” she added thoughtfully, “it will be a very explicit scene, and the audience will get another look at all the places she put the perfume.”

“And if the movie flops?”

“It flops.” She shrugged. “Life’s a gamble.”

“Not with company funds.” Richard shook his pencil at her. “You’ll stay inside the budget this time.”

She ignored the pencil. “If we get this stuff placed in the right movie, it could be bigger than Paradise.”

“And if we get it placed in the wrong movie, we’ll go to executive hell.” He turned back to his papers.

She took a deep breath. Calm. Courteous and cooperative. “I’m still going to suggest it in the memo.”

He didn’t look up. “Just as long as you realize I’m probably still going to reject it in the budget.”

“Fine,” she said, and slammed her portfolio shut.

“Fine,” he said, and looked up and smiled. “See you at seven.”

* * *

“I’VE GOT A DINNER DATE with the executive Hun,” Emily said to Jane as she passed her desk. Jane rose and followed her into the office.

“Tell me everything.”

“It’s a toss-up.” Emily slumped into her chair. “His face is still beautiful, but he also still has a narrow, little cost-effective mind.”

“Which means he disagreed with you.”

“Oh, please.”

“So where are you going?”

“I have no idea. He, of course, will decide.” Emily frowned. “What do you want to bet he orders for me?”

“Why do you care? You can sit and look at him all night.”

“A pretty face isn’t everything,” Emily told her primly.

“Forget the face.” Jane sank into her chair. “The body is to die for.”

“How can you tell? The man is always in a suit. I bet he sleeps in a tie.”

“Karen went in to give him some papers, and he was changing his shirt. He’d spilled coffee on it, and he keeps a spare for emergencies.”

“He would.”

“She saw him with his shirt off.”

“And?”

“She’s still speechless.”

“I doubt he’ll take his shirt off at dinner.”

“No, but if you play your cards right...”

“Don’t you ever think of anything but sex?”

“Frequently. But let’s face it, here. You’re not going to dinner to work on Perfume X. You’re attracted to him.”

“Sizzle.”

“Pardon?”

“Perfume X is now Sizzle.”

“And does it?”

“It will. I’m on my way to R & D.”

“Well, this should be an interesting campaign. What are you going to wear?”

“For what?”

“For dinner, dummy. I suggest you wear something sexy. Drive him wild.”

“The only thing I do that drives Richard Parker wild is spend company money. Which reminds me, will you get me Laura in Los Angeles? We need a product placement.”

“Big bucks. Did we get the Hun’s okay to spend the money?”

“No, we’re going to surprise him.” Emily smiled evilly. “That man positively needs more surprises in his life.”

* * *

“HEY, EM. WHAT’S NEW?” Laura said when Emily was put through to her.

“Perfume. A hot new perfume called Sizzle. We need a product placement. Something very sexy.”

“Is this the next Paradise?”

“If I have anything to say about it, it will be.”

“Then it will be.” Laura laughed. “You always have something to say about it. I’ll get right on it.”

“Thanks. How’s Gary?”

“Gone,” Laura said cheerfully.

“Good. I never liked him.”

“He never liked you, either. Thought you were a suit.”

“He was right. You don’t sound too unhappy about this.”

“Oh, he was always just a filler. Only a desperate woman would take Gary seriously.”

“Only a desperate woman would take any man seriously.”

“And you’re the woman marketing Sizzle?”

“I said ‘seriously.’ I’ve decided you don’t have to take a man seriously to have sex.” Emily visualized Richard as a cheap pickup to be thrown away like a worn-out glove after a meaningless but passionate fling.

It was a new approach for her, but she liked the idea.

“My sentiments exactly about Gary,” Laura said. “I’ll get back with you ASAP.”

After she hung up, Emily thought about Richard. Sex with Richard. Meaningless though it might be, it would probably be great because he was gorgeous. And intelligent. And he did have a body to die for.

And I'm having dinner with him tonight.

Maybe Jane's right, she thought.

Jane buzzed her. "You told me to remind you about R & D."

"On my way." Emily hesitated. "Hey, while I'm gone, I need you to run an errand."

"Anything, my leader."

"I need some black lace underwear."

"Now you're talking. I won't fail you."

* * *

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT always worried Emily. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on and a lot of people in white lab coats, but no one ever seemed to be in charge. After she'd dated the head of that department, Chris Crosswell, for a while, she'd worried even more. Chris had the concentration of a fruit fly and the morals of a mink. It seemed such a bad personality profile for the head of a department with so many bubbling beakers. No wonder it looked as if no one was in charge.

"Hello, beautiful," he said when he saw her. "Let's have dinner."

"Sorry, I'm busy." She held out the bottle. "About this perfume—"

"Busy? Who with?"

"None of your business. About this perfume—"

"The new guy on twelfth. I thought he'd spot you."

"Chris, the perfume needs work."

"So does our relationship."

"We don't have a relationship," she told him. "We haven't had a relationship for two years. You've been married and divorced since then. Now about the perfume—"

"Which only goes to show how much work our relationship needs."

She took his hand and put the bottle in it. "We want it to sizzle."

"Sizzle?"

"Tingle a little on the skin. Heat up a little. Can you do it?"

"Sure." He shrugged. "When do you need it?"

"Yesterday." Emily began to back toward the door. "As soon as possible."

"You got it. Now about dinner..."

"You cannot possibly take me to dinner. You've got to put some sizzle in that bottle."

"I'd rather put some sizzle in you."

"Thank you, Chris." Emily backed out the door. "Let me know when it's done."

One thing you can say for Richard, she told herself as she escaped. He's never that asinine.

She was actually beginning to look forward to dinner.

* * *

THE EVENING STARTED well. Emily brushed her hair in a cloud around her shoulders and wore her new black lace underwear, one of two sets Jane had splurged on with her money.

"Always have a backup set," Jane had told her. "You never know, he may rip this stuff off you with his teeth in the throes of passion."

Emily visualized it. "Sounds good."

She topped the underwear with her best short black dress, dabbed on some nonheating Sizzle, and was just congratulating herself on how sophisticated and adult she looked when the doorbell rang and she went cold with nerves.

This is just dinner, she told herself. He's a Hun. You don't care. This is meaningless.

It didn't work.

As much as she hated to admit it, the anticipation she'd felt earlier had grown the more she'd thought about Richard. For the first time in a long time, she was really looking forward to an evening with a man. "So much for a meaningless fling," she told herself, and fought down another little spurt of panic as the doorbell rang again.

Her panic subsided when she answered the door and saw him there, solid and familiar. He stood still for a moment when she opened the door, and then he swallowed and said, "You're beautiful." He brought her gardenias. He handed her into the cab as if she were made of porcelain.

This is good, Emily thought. He looks like a god, and he treats me like a goddess. This could work.

He took her to the Celestial for dinner.

"George said this was your favorite restaurant," Richard told her as they sat down.

Emily clamped her lips together. You could have asked me where I wanted to eat, she thought, and then sighed. Be nice, Emily. He's being nice. And you need him on your side. And he's paying; he has a right to choose the restaurant. Besides, it is your favorite. Besides, he's gorgeous.

"I'm starving." He motioned to the waiter. "Let's skip drinks and go right to dinner."

"I wouldn't mind a glass of wine," Emily said, but Richard was already ordering.

"Sweet and sour soup. Mongolian beef."

"I don't care for Mongolian beef," Emily said politely.

"Mu-shu pork."

"I like garlic chicken."

"Su-san shan."

"I really hate su-san shan."

"Princess prawns." He beamed at her. "How does that sound?"

"Have you had your hearing checked lately?"

Richard was already handing the menus to the waiter. "That'll be fine."

"Plum sauce on mu-shu pork?" the waiter asked.

"No," Richard said.

"I like plum sauce," Emily said, and the waiter smiled at her and nodded.

Thank God, she thought. I was afraid I'd suddenly gone mute.

"We needed to get away from the office." Richard smiled at her. "Too many aggravations there."

The only aggravation there just ordered dinner for me here, Emily thought.

"Your hair looks wonderful." He looked at her, his eyes shining, and then smiled that sexy boyish grin that made her breathing quit every time. "You're lovely in the office, but tonight you're absolutely gorgeous."

He's not that aggravating, Emily thought, remembering to inhale. He has potential. Be nice, Em. "This is really nice of you." She leaned forward. "It really shows me how much you want our partnership to work. And I'm glad you're concerned about our working relationship, because I think we can do much better."

"Absolutely." Richard took her hand. "I agree with you absolutely."

His touch startled her. He had nice hands. Nice warm hands with tapered fingers. His nails were beautifully manicured, she noted, trying to concentrate on details so she could ignore the warmth spreading into her from his fingers. She breathed a little harder and met his eyes. He was looking at her with naked adoration. He really was sweet.

Do not become emotionally attached to the Hun, she told herself. Simply use his body mercilessly and then fling him aside.

"Tell me about yourself." His hand tightened on hers. "I want to know everything."

Emily blinked. "Why?"

He seemed taken aback. "Don't you think it's important for people who, uh, work together to get to know each other?"

“I guess so.” Emily thought about it. She and George had worked together for eight years, and he’d never even asked her where she lived, let alone gotten to know her. This was an interesting side of Richard. “All right.”

She answered his questions through the soup and the pork. By the time she was finished, she knew why Richard was so successful. He asked the right questions and, this time, listened to the answers. Midway through her life story, she realized he was piecing together the things that made her the person she was; he was doing in-depth research on his latest project—her. It was intensely flattering and not a little disconcerting.

But at least he was listening.

He was also charming, intelligent and polite. Emily relaxed and enjoyed herself with him, and the more she relaxed the more he opened up, so that by the time the pork was gone, there was a vulnerability in him she hadn’t seen before. It was devastating. Emily found herself fighting against falling in love with him. And losing.

Don’t be a fool, she said, and then she looked into his incredible blue eyes, eyes so plainly adoring her, and fell some more.

“Mongolian beef, princess prawns, su-san shan,” the waiter said, putting the dishes on the table.

“Great.” Richard ladled Mongolian beef onto her rice.

Emily looked at the stuff. She didn’t care for beef in general, and she hated beef cooked in oil. The onions looked like worms. Richard added several spoonfuls of vegetables, also glistening with oil. Then he served her prawns, and she began to eat, carefully avoiding the beef and vegetables.

“You’re not eating your beef.” Richard frowned. “Is there something wrong? Should I send it back?”

“I don’t like Mongolian beef.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“I did. You didn’t listen.”

He looked at her plate. “Su-san shan, too?”

“Yes. The waiter heard me. That’s why I got plum sauce on my mu-shu pork.”

“You like plum sauce?”

“Yes.” Emily sighed, patient to the end. “I mentioned it.”

“I don’t listen.” He looked at her with eyes like a scolded puppy’s.

“No, you don’t.” She couldn’t bear to see him so unhappy so she smiled at him. “Work on that.”

“I will,” he promised.

“Good. Now it’s your turn. Tell me about you.”

He hesitated, but she was a good researcher, too, and by the time the fortune cookies arrived, Emily knew everything about his past. They had a lot in common. They both agreed, for instance, that Walt Disney should have been shot, instead of Old Yeller, because they’d both been traumatized by the movie. They’d both been president of their senior class in high school. They’d both been at the head of their classes at business school. They both truly enjoyed their jobs. They’d both had disastrous relationships in the past. They were both determined to have a better one, perhaps a permanent one, in their future.

Emily forgot his high-handedness and was happy again. He was so sweet, so bright, so kind, so vulnerable, so obviously dazzled by her. So sexy, she thought.

So right for me.

So when he took her home, she invited him in.

She closed the door behind them and turned, and he kissed her. He moved slow enough to give her time to say no if she wanted to, fast enough to give her the feeling of being swept off her feet.

Nice timing, she thought as his lips touched hers. Then she stopped thinking.

He hadn’t spent all his nights studying to be the Budget Hun. His lips were firm on hers, moving against hers, and she felt the warmth he always generated start again. She kissed him back, sliding her

arms around his neck. She opened her lips and touched his with her tongue, and he slid his tongue into her mouth, tangling with hers, stroking inside her. The heat was everywhere in her now, and she clutched at him, leaning into him. He brought his hand up to the back of her head, lacing his fingers into her long dark hair to hold her close.

When he moved his hand down again, her hair became tangled in his sleeve buttons. She felt it first as a tug and broke the kiss.

“Richard,” Emily said, and he said huskily, “I know,” and found her mouth again. He moved his hand down her body and she felt the hard pull against her hair.

“No, Richard! Wait! My hair...” She dropped her head back to ease the pull on her scalp.

He bent to kiss her exposed neck, moving kisses down into her cleavage. He also moved his hand to her rear end.

“Ouch! Richard, stop it!”

“What?” he asked huskily, his hand moving across her rear. Her head swayed with his hand. It really hurt.

“My hair.” She held on to it, trying to take the pressure off her scalp. “You—”

“You have beautiful hair.” He lifted his hand to run his fingers through it and the pull stopped.

“Thank God.” She let her head drop forward as the pull eased, tears in her eyes from the pain.

“You’re crying,” he said softly, touched.

“My hair’s caught on your sleeve.”

“You’re so beautiful.” He bent to kiss her again.

“Dammit, Richard, my hair’s caught on your sleeve!” Emily yelled.

“What?”

She pulled away from him, holding on to his arm so he wouldn’t jerk her hair out. A lock of her hair was wound around his sleeve button.

“Don’t move.” She blinked back the tears of pain. “This really hurts.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He gently untangled her.

“I did!”

The mood wasn’t broken, it was shattered. It took every ounce of self-control she had not to murder him where he stood.

“It’s probably better if you go now,” Emily said, backing away as Richard moved to hold her again. “I’ve got to be at work tomorrow. I’m meeting with advertising on the package design and you know those ad guys... Somebody’s got to watch them every minute.” She’d moved to the door as she spoke, and she opened it now. “I had a lovely evening.”

“How’s your head?” Richard looked disappointed and rueful and faintly annoyed.

She rubbed her scalp where the tug had done the most damage. “I’ll take an aspirin. It’ll be fine.”

“Let’s try again.” He smiled down at her. “Come out with me again.”

Emily closed her eyes. “Why don’t we talk about it later?” Her head really did hurt. Go away, she thought. I told you I needed an aspirin. Go away so I can take one.

“How about Friday night?”

“Richard. You don’t listen. I told you my head hurt. I told you I needed an aspirin. I told you we’d talk about it later.”

“Saturday?”

“Never.” Her voice rose almost to a shriek. “Never again. Not until you learn to listen. Take classes. Get a hearing aid. But get out of my life until you can hear me when I speak.” She pushed him out the door and slammed it in his face.

I don’t believe this, she fumed. How can one sweet, charming, intelligent, sexy, good-looking guy be such a lousy listener? God, my head hurts.

I am never going near him again, she thought as she turned away from the door. Not even if someone ties him down and forces him to listen to me. Never, ever again.

CHAPTER THREE

JANE'S REACTION WAS predictable.

"I don't see what's so funny about this." Emily frowned as she watched Jane laughing hysterically in the chair in front of her.

"Tell me the part again where he patted your rear," Jane gasped. "The part where your head bobbed up and down with his arm."

"You're disgusting." Emily sat down at her desk and tried to ignore her.

"I'd have paid money to see that."

"It hurt."

"Poor baby. So when are you seeing him again?"

"Never. I threw him out."

Jane stopped laughing. "Are you nuts? It was an accident. He didn't do it on purpose."

"He doesn't listen to me." Emily's teeth clenched as she thought about him.

"Well, you don't listen to me, and I'm sticking with you," Jane pointed out.

Emily looked up, outraged. "I listen to you."

"Good. Then my advice is, go out with him again."

"No."

"See, you don't listen."

"Jane..."

"All right, all right." Jane got up to go. "How is this going to affect your working relationship?"

"What working relationship? He doesn't listen there, either."

Jane shook her head. "You're making a big mistake. Aside from this one little flaw—"

"Little flaw?"

"—this guy is perfect for you. And you're going to let him get away." Jane shook her head again as she went back to her desk. "Big mistake."

* * *

"I'M REALLY SORRY, Emily," Richard said when she went to his office to check on some cost figures.

"Richard, it's not important." Emily sat and reached for the papers she needed. "It could have happened to anyone."

"Anyone else would have listened." He looked down at her, regret palpable in his eyes. He looked big and broad and solid and dependable and sexy. Also crazy about her, and devastated that she was unhappy with him.

Emily closed her eyes. She could feel herself weakening. No, she thought, and opened her eyes.

"I don't think we should date, Richard. I'm just not comfortable with the idea of working together and dating."

"Emily—"

"Listen to me," she said, and he flushed.

"You're right." He sat down. "About the listening, not about the dating. But if that's the way you feel, I'll listen."

"Thank you. Now about the estimates..." She found the figures she needed and then left before he could do something to wreck her defenses. It was a close call.

During the next week, Richard found several pretexts to call private meetings with her, but she either sent him memos or brought Jane with her, much to Jane's disgust. Eventually he got the hint, and for the next three weeks, she didn't see him at all. She missed his sweetness and the breathless heat she fell into whenever he was close, but she didn't miss his bossiness at all. She didn't have a chance to; he bombarded her with memos that needed answers, forms that needed filling out and reports that needed filing yesterday. Ninety percent of the work, she thought, was unnecessary.

Emily took his last report request out to Jane.

“This is ridiculous. He has all these figures. If he sends anything else, send it back. Who does he think he is?”

Jane took the report. “I don’t want to tell you this, but he wants you in his office.”

“What did he say? ‘Have her washed and sent to my tent?’”

“Karen just said he wanted you in his office ASAP.”

“This stops now,” Emily snapped and turned on her heel toward the elevators.

“Don’t bother to announce me,” she told Karen, and opened Richard’s door without knocking.

He was sitting at his desk, comparing figures from two neat stacks of reports. His desk was obsessively tidy; a small bottle, two stacks of papers, one pen, a pitcher of water and a drinking glass. Nothing else. He must be a Martian, Emily thought. How can anybody work in such obsessive neatness? He doesn’t even take off his suit jacket.

But he does look great.

“I bet your mom was really strict, wasn’t she?” Emily asked.

Richard looked up from his desk, surprised and slightly annoyed.

“You summoned me.” Emily put her hands on her hips. “I came running as soon as I heard.”

“The new formula came up from the lab.” He gestured toward the bottle on the desk. “Your idea about the, er, tingle.”

“Why did it come to you?” Emily asked, exasperated. “You don’t give a damn about tingle.”

“I don’t know.” Richard pulled his eyes away from her and turned back to his reports. “Just take it.”

“What I like most about working with you is your charm.” Emily picked up the bottle. “Don’t you ever summon me again. You want me, you come down to see me.” She turned to go.

“Emily, wait.”

She took a deep breath and turned back, fire in her eye.

Richard ran his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I get caught up in something and I forget my manners. Let’s try again. I didn’t mean to summon you. I just wanted you to know the perfume was here. If they send it up here again, I’ll send Karen down to you with it.”

“Thank you.” Emily brought her chin up. “I’d appreciate it.”

Richard nodded, then really looked at her, deep into her eyes. His own eyes softened, and there was an appeal there that was hard to resist.

Emily swallowed. “I’m sorry. I’m just touchy about...being bossed.”

“I know. And I keep forgetting and trying to boss you. And not listening.” He smiled at her, and she smiled back automatically. Even if he was a deaf Hun, he had a sweet smile.

He put down the report. “Please try the perfume on. Let’s see if it works.”

“If you will,” she said, and he took the bottle from her and dabbed a couple of drops on the back of his hand.

She sat down across from him. “It probably won’t work there. I think R & D said it needs heat for the chemical reaction.” She picked up the bottle and pulled out the stopper, then stroked it into the hollow between her breasts. He watched her, mesmerized, and then said in a strangled voice, “I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“It’s the warmest place I’ve got,” she said, and when he raised his eyebrows, she added, “For perfume, anyway,” and then blushed.

He rubbed his fingers over the perfume on his hand. “There is a slight tingle. A little warmth.”

The skin between her breasts grew warm and began to prickle slightly. Emily rubbed her finger over the tingle and shivered. It was somewhere between a tickle and heat, and she felt her skin respond and tighten. “Make a note never to put this stuff on any erogenous zone. This is like Spanish fly.”

He was staring at her blouse, and she looked down and saw that her nipples were pushing against the thin silk. She flushed and hunched her shoulders so her blouse wouldn’t be stretched so

tight across her, but all she accomplished was to push her breasts together, deepening her cleavage and his confusion.

It also created more heat between her breasts, and the perfume started to sting.

“Is your hand burning?” she asked him, and he tore his eyes from her blouse.

“What? Uh, yes, a little.”

“They’ve made it too strong.” Emily drew a breath. “Way too strong.” She shifted in her chair and ran her fingertips into her blouse while Richard watched, fascinated.

“Are you all right?”

Emily bit her lip. “Oh, yes, sure.”

The stuff was really blazing now. She shifted uneasily in her chair.

“Emily?”

It was too much. She tore open the top buttons of her blouse and reached over the desk, ripping his pocket square from his suit jacket, giving him a brief glimpse of white lace stretched over full round breasts before she drenched his handkerchief in the water pitcher and plastered it on the fire on her skin.

When the burning eased, she said, “I am personally going to slaughter the folks in R & D.”

“Are you all right?”

She winced as she blotted the perfume off with the dripping cloth. “Almost. How’s your hand?”

“Not bad.” He flexed it a little. “Hardly noticeable, really.”

“It must be the heat, then.” She pulled away the cloth and examined the red patch on her skin.

“Well, no scars, anyway.” She looked up to see him staring.

“No, it looks great,” he said.

She pulled her blouse shut. “Sorry about your pocket hankie.”

He finally gave up and laughed. “Anytime. Shall I send the bottle back?”

“No.” She picked up the bottle. “I want to deliver this personally.”

“My sympathies to R & D, then.”

She stopped, intrigued. “Why?”

He grinned at her ruefully. “Of all the people in this company, you’re the one I’d least want coming after me. You take no prisoners.”

“Good.” She smiled back. “Remember that.”

* * *

“LET’S GO TO LUNCH,” Chris said when she stormed into the lab. “My place.”

“Crowell, the perfume peels skin off. Fix it, or your job will be someone else’s.”

“What do you mean, peels skin off?”

“It burns. Didn’t you test this stuff?”

“Yes, of course, we did.” Chris took the bottle back. “On wrists and behind the ears. No problem.”

“Well, it’s a problem other places.”

“What other places?”

“Just fix it,” Emily snapped.

He shook his head. “You need to relax. Dump the twelfth floor and come out to dinner with me tonight.” He leered. “You can show me the other places.”

“You won’t be eating dinner, Crowell. You will be fixing the sizzle in that bottle.”

“Oh, come on, Emily,” he said, and then stopped, chilled by the look in her eye.

“I am not without power here,” she said coldly. “Do you believe I can have you fired?”

He thought about it. “Yes.”

“Do you believe I will have you fired if you do not fix that perfume and if you do not stop harassing me?”

He looked at her eyes. “Yes.”

“Then I suggest you get to work,” she said, then left, slamming the door behind her. Jane followed her into the office when she got back.

“What did he do now?”

“Could I get somebody fired for harassment?”

“Richard?” Jane was shocked.

“No!” Emily said, outraged. “Of course not! It’s that idiot Crowwell.”

“Thousands would cheer.” Jane sat down.

“Do I have that kind of power here?”

“Sure. Especially if Richard found out.”

“I don’t want him doing my dirty work.”

“What did Crowwell do?”

“Nothing he hasn’t been doing for the past two years. I just finally broke today. I was so mad. I’m still so mad.”

“I can tell. Do you think he’ll stop?”

Emily thought about it. “Yes. He knows I’m serious, and he believes I can get rid of him.”

“You can. George’s bluster notwithstanding, the company doesn’t want to lose you.”

“It’s nice to know I’m valued.”

“You’re not.” Jane crossed her legs and looked confident. “They just know that if you go, I go, and then who’s going to run this place?”

“True.” Emily sat down. “Has advertising got the bottle prototype yet?”

“Should have it by tomorrow.” The phone rang and Jane moved to pick it up.

Emily stared out her window, and thought about how outraged she’d felt when Jane suggested that Richard was harassing her. He would never do that. He might not listen, but he would never deliberately use their personal relationship against her at the office. He had morals. He had ethics. He had—

“Laura’s on one,” Jane said, and Emily picked up the phone.

“What have you got?” she asked.

“Two possibilities. One’s a sure thing—big stars, big promotion, everything. It’s a glitzy caper movie, lots of designer labels, but very classy.”

“Sounds like we could get lost in the labels. What’s the other one?”

“This is a real gamble.” Laura paused. “There’s this kid from UCLA, shooting his first film. It’s about these two business types who become sexually obsessed with each other. And there is a scene where the woman gets dressed that would be perfect for the product.”

“Not if no one ever sees the movie.” Emily swung around in her chair to stare out the window. “How much for the big one?”

“You’re not going to like this,” Laura said, and named the figure.

“The whole damn movie couldn’t have cost that much,” Emily protested.

“Actually for these guys, it’s chicken feed. Do you want me to negotiate?”

“No.” Emily swung back to her desk. “They’ve put a watchdog on me here. I’d never get away with spending anywhere near that much. Tell me more about this kid.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll send you some scenes from the film. He really needs the money, so he’s cooperating. They’re shooting the scene where she gets dressed next week, so if you like the film, get a bottle of that stuff out here fast.”

“What’s his price?”

“He doesn’t have one. He’s trusting me to get him a good deal.”

“Which you will. So how much is the kid going to cost me?”

“See the film clips.” Laura’s voice purred with reasonableness. “Then we’ll talk.”

“The film is that good?”

“The film is that good.”

“Rush it out here, then,” Emily said. “And I’ll see if it does anything for me.”

After she’d hung up, Emily thought about the movie. A brand-new movie with a hot new director. Another Sex, Lies, and Videotape. They’d get free publicity for having had the forethought to find the newest breakthrough movie. If it was as hot as Laura said, and Laura didn’t make mistakes, this could be all they’d need to put Sizzle into the stratosphere.

Richard’s last memo had absolutely ruled out any possibility of product placement. She’d tried to explain again, but he hadn’t listened. Her lips tightened at the thought. He hadn’t listened.

She buzzed Jane.

“I’m expecting a videotape from Laura tomorrow. Whatever you do, make sure Richard doesn’t see it.”

“Gotcha,” Jane said. “What is it? A dirty movie?”

“If we’re lucky,” Emily said.

The film arrived the next day, but it was after five before Emily had a chance to look at it. Richard had also ruled out buying rubies, so she’d been searching for loose stones to rent, which was almost impossible. At five-thirty she gave up and ran for the elevator. When the doors opened, Richard was the only one inside.

“Did you find any rubies to rent?” He smiled at her, and she ignored him. I’ve had a lousy day trying to solve the hopeless problem you created for me. There’s not enough charm in the world, she thought.

After a few moments, he tried again.

“A dirty movie?” He gestured at the videotape in her hand.

“I don’t know.” She tried to shove it into her pocket. “An old friend sent it to me. I’m going to rent a VCR and find out.”

“I have a VCR. Come home with me. We’ll get a pizza and watch your tape.”

Emily shook her head. “I don’t even know what’s on it.”

“Then we can find out together.” Richard took her arm and walked her to the street, hailed a cab and put her into it. He gave the cabby his address and then climbed in beside her.

“What do you want on your pizza?” Richard asked.

“I have a choice?” Emily said.

* * *

RICHARD’S APARTMENT WAS surprising. It was as neat as she’d expected, but instead of the grim glass-and-steel decor she’d visualized for him, it was leather and brass, rich and masculine, but still warm.

“This place is great,” she said, and he smiled at her, pleased.

“I’ll open some wine.” He pulled a bottle from a well-stocked wine rack. “Then we can order the pizza.”

Emily moved to stop him. “Really, don’t go to any trouble. I just need to see a little of the tape, and then I’ll go.”

He eased the cork out of the bottle and poured the wine into two glasses he took from an overhead rack.

“No trouble.” He handed her a glass and lifted his in a toast. “To Sizzle.”

Emily sighed. “To Sizzle,” she echoed, and drank while he watched to see if she liked it. The wine was full-bodied and tart, and she drank again. “This is wonderful,” she said, and he smiled at her, relieved, and refilled her glass as she protested.

“No, really. I won’t be able to see the tape. Where’s your VCR?”

“This way.” He led her through double doors off the living room.

The first thing she saw was his big brass bed, a riot of curling, twisting, gleaming metal. “It’s beautiful,” she said, staring at it. He’d covered it with a thick white down comforter, and she had a brief vision of herself stretched across it while...

“It was my grandmother’s.” His eyes met hers and she had a fleeting thought he might have been thinking the same thing that she had been.

Stop fantasizing, she told herself.

Richard went to a tall cabinet in the corner of the room and opened the doors to reveal a large TV and VCR unit. He slipped in the tape and turned on the TV.

“You’ll have to sit on the bed,” he said, turning back to her. “I don’t have any chairs in here. Unless you’d like a stool from the kitchen?”

“No, the bed’s fine.” Emily perched primly on the edge.

Richard punched the play button, looked at her uncertainly for a moment then left her.

A clapper appeared on the screen with the scene number, and then it was pulled away. A man and a woman stood facing each other, dark and slender, dressed conservatively, talking about a business deal they were working on. Then the woman smiled and said, “This isn’t what this is all about.” She kissed him slowly, and the scene exploded with eroticism as they undressed each other and made love. Emily forgot she was in Richard’s bedroom and sat mesmerized by the tape, drinking slowly from her wineglass and becoming more and more flushed as the couple on the screen became more and more passionate. It was the most erotic love scene she’d ever seen.

The next scene began, a chase scene through what looked like San Francisco, and Emily tore her eyes away from the set. Richard had come back and was watching her, and she suddenly became conscious of how flushed she was and how fast she was breathing. She put down her glass and got up from the bed.

“Well,” she said, then stopped. He, too, had put his glass down and was coming toward her. “Uh, Richard,” she began, and he put his arms around her and pulled her close. “I don’t think so,” she said, and he kissed her, his lips soft but firm on hers, holding her against him while she drowned in his kiss.

When she came up for air, she was reeling. “Wait a minute,” she gasped, and he kissed her again, running his hands across her back, pulling her hard against him. She shoved him away.

“You never listen,” she said.

He stopped and said, “I’m sorry,” and tried to get his breath back, looking at her with a dizziness compounded equally from lust and adoration. He looks great when he’s dizzy, she thought. I’m dizzy, too. What am I doing?

Then he touched her and said “I’m sorry” again, and she gave up and said, “That’s good enough for me.” She moved against him, running her hands across his chest and up and around his neck, pulling his mouth down to hers, kissing him hard, biting him on the lip. He kissed her back and then pulled his face away from hers and picked her up, dropping her into the middle of the thick white comforter and rolling onto it beside her. He kissed her neck, then the hollow of her throat, and then the warm place between her breasts, while she ran her fingernails over his back through his shirt. His lips left a trail of heat on her skin.

“Sizzle,” she said, and laughed, and he did, too, and kissed her again.

She felt the heat flow into her bone-deep, felt the sizzle everywhere he touched her, and she rolled as close as she could to him to feel his body hard next to hers.

He unbuttoned her blouse, kissing the tops of her breasts above the lacy bra and making her shiver while he slid his hands beneath her back to find her bra clasp.

“It’s in front,” she whispered, but he still ran his fingers along her back. “Richard, the hook is in front.”

“What?” he murmured into her ear, not listening.

She closed her eyes in irritation, but then he moved his tongue into her ear, and the sizzle down her spine made her forget her irritation. She unhooked her bra herself and then unbuttoned his shirt and ran her tongue over the hard muscles of his chest, and when he finally pulled her bra off, she rolled into him, relishing the heat of their bodies against each other.

He pushed her back gently. “I’ve been waiting for this a long time,” he said, and bent over her, touching her nipples lightly with his tongue, first one then the other, finally sinking his mouth over her breast and sucking until she cried and twisted in his arms, the heat and need so great she had to move against him, hard against his mouth and hands, because he felt so impossibly good wherever he touched her. He moved his mouth to her other breast and tormented her until she was almost unconscious with lust for him. Then he slid his hand under her skirt to stroke the smooth silk between her legs.

Any thought Emily might still have cherished of saying no disappeared. She writhed under his hand and reached for him, stroking down across his stomach with her hand until she felt him hard beneath the fabric of his clothing. She pressed against him, and he moaned and kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth.

When he moved his mouth to her throat, she gasped, “Richard, I—”

“Not now,” he said, and moved his hand down her body.

Not now? Emily felt herself grow even hotter from anger. Not now? Who the hell did he think he was?

He pushed his hand into her panties and then slid his fingers into her, and she forgot she cared who he was and moaned at the sheer tormenting ecstasy of his hand.

His doorbell rang.

“Make love to me now,” she said to him. She crawled on top of him, pushing herself down on his hand. “I can’t believe how much I want you.”

“Wait.” He moved his hand away. “I’ll get rid of whoever it is. I’ll be back.”

“No,” she said, trying to hold on to him, but he slid out from under her, kissing her breast as he went and leaving her gasping on the bed. After a few minutes, she pulled herself up and saw herself in the mirror at the foot of the bed. Her French twist had loosened, her eyes were half-closed with lust and her mouth was bruised from his. She was naked to the waist, flushed with need for him.

And he was in the living room, talking to someone.

“I don’t believe this,” she muttered. She slipped off the bed, put her bra and blouse back on and tucked her hair back into some kind of order. Then she ejected the tape from the VCR and went into the living room.

He was standing at the door talking to George, whose eyes went wide when he saw her.

“Thanks for letting me use the VCR,” she said, pulling on her coat. “See you tomorrow.” She ducked around them both and walked rapidly toward the elevator. The doors slid open at once, and she got in.

I can’t believe I did that, she thought. I can’t believe I almost did that. With Richard Parker. Who is beautiful, but sort of cold. Only he wasn’t cold tonight. Oh, my God, she thought. I really want him. She leaned back against the wall of the elevator and thought about how wonderful making love with him would have been. Except that he had to answer the damn door. She’d said no, don’t, but he knew best. He didn’t listen. The hell with him.

She caught a cab home and then dreamed of him all night, making love to her to the sound of doorbells.

* * *

“AND WHAT DID WE DO that was so special yesterday?” Jane asked archly.

“I had a bad night,” Emily snapped. “Say what you mean.”

“Three dozen roses in a crystal vase on your desk. Here’s the card. It’s sealed so I couldn’t read it. You will, of course, show it to me because it would be too cruel of you not to.”

The card read, “I’m sorry. Let me make it up to you. Richard.”

“Fat chance.” Emily dropped the card into the wastebasket. She handed Jane the videotape. “Watch this tonight and see what you think. For product placement.”

Jane promptly fished the card out of the wastebasket and followed her into the office as she read it.

“Richard, huh? What did he do?”

“It’s what he didn’t do.” The roses were lovely. She handed them to Jane. “Send these back to him.”

“Boy, he must have really screwed up,” Jane said, taking the vase.

Jane buzzed her twenty minutes later. “The Hun is on line three. Be gentle with him.”

“Ha.” Emily punched three. “Yes?”

“Emily, I’m sorry about last night.”

“You should be.”

“Let me make it up to you.”

“Not even with rubies. Any man who would leave me for George—”

“I just wanted to get rid of him so we wouldn’t be interrupted.”

“And when the Girl Scouts came selling cookies, you’d talk to them, too. And Jehovah’s Witnesses, and some guy working his way through college by selling encyclopedias.”

She heard a faint buzz, and he swore. “Hold on a second,” he said. “I’ve got another call.” And the line fell silent.

Emily clutched the receiver in a death grip and then carefully returned it to the cradle.

Jane opened the door. “I saw the light go out. What happened?”

“He put me on hold.”

Jane swallowed. “Oh, boy.”

“The lousy son of a bitch put me on hold.”

Jane went out, closing the door behind her.

Emily stared straight ahead, rigid with anger.

Jane buzzed her again. “Richard on two.”

Emily picked up the phone.

“Emily, I...”

“Don’t you ever put me on hold again.”

“Jane said that was a mistake,” he said ruefully. “Let me make it up to you.”

“You can’t make it up to me. Not with dinners, not with roses, not with rubies. You are a controlling, cost-effective, power-mad, anal-retentive, deaf son of a bitch!” She ended on what from a lesser woman would have been a shriek and slammed the phone down. Then she buzzed Jane.

“I am not taking any calls from Richard Parker no matter what he has to say. If he wants to communicate with me, tell him to send a memo.”

“Right,” Jane said.

* * *

“MEETING IN THE conference room at five,” Jane said as Emily got ready to leave that night.

“What?”

“Memo just in from George’s office.” Jane handed it to her.

Emily groaned and crumpled the memo. “I’m tired. I want to go home.”

“Well, you can as soon as you’ve done the executive bit.”

“I wish I was a secretary.”

“No, you don’t.” Jane put her coat on. “You’re a terrible typist. You’d starve. See you tomorrow.”

Emily kicked off her shoes and sat in the gloom of her office. I’m so tired, she thought. And my panty hose are driving me nuts. I hate panty hose. They’re an invention of the devil. I’m never wearing them again. She took them off as a gesture of independence and threw them away. There was a run in one leg, anyway.

Instantly she felt better, cooler. She leaned back in her chair and spread her legs apart to cool them, reveling in the relief from the scratchy heat of the hose. It reminded her of other ways of feeling good. It reminded her that she was still so frustrated from the night before she wanted to kill.

It reminded her she still wanted Richard.

No, she didn't. She was going to forget him and go home.

She looked at the clock. Five-fifteen. Damn.

She slipped her bare feet into her heels and went down the hall to the conference room.

"George?" It was dark in the room, and as the door swung behind her she bumped into him, tall and broad and muscular.

Not George.

Richard.

CHAPTER FOUR

"OH, NO." EMILY turned to leave, but his arms went around her from behind, pulling her gently back against him as he buried kisses in the side of her neck.

"No doorbells this time," he whispered. "I swear."

She felt dizzy with the sudden heat he stirred in her.

No, she thought, fighting it. No way.

She kicked back at him with her heel, and he said, "Ouch!" but he didn't let go.

Emily meant to say no. She knew she could pull away easily, that he wouldn't stop her. But his mouth was so teasingly gentle on her skin, and he was so hard against her, and finally she just wanted him so much. She gave up and turned and found his mouth in the dark and licked his lips, thrusting her tongue into his mouth as she thrust her hips against his. She heard him gasp and felt his body shudder under her assault, and then he picked her up and sat her on the edge of the conference table, moving his body between her legs. She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him tight against her as his fingers fumbled at the buttons of her blouse. She tried to undo his shirt, but he was leaning down to her breasts, running his tongue across her.

Then she heard voices in the hall. The cleaners.

"Not again," Emily said.

And Richard said, "No. Nothing stops us this time." He pulled away from her and slid his hand under her skirt to pull off her bikini panties.

"You put me on hold again, and it will be the last time you ever touch me," Emily said with blood in her voice.

"If I have to, I'll make love to you while the cleaners watch," Richard said, and she lifted her hips to help him slide her panties off.

"I wish I could see you," he said. "You're so beautiful, but it's too damn dark in here." His hand slid between her legs, and he stroked her there, tormenting her, kissing her shoulders and neck, until she laced her fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth to hers.

When he stopped, she said, "No, don't stop," and tried to pull him back to her, but he kissed her and pulled her to the edge of the table. She realized that he was fumbling with a condom and she laughed until he slid hard into her with a suddenness that made her cry out. His hands, clamped on her hips, pulled her to him again and again, and he leaned into her each time, to stroke as deeply as he could, building the heat and pressure in her until she cried out and twisted in his arms, and he drove harder and faster to spur her to explode again and again until she collapsed in his arms and lay there shuddering, her legs still wrapped around his waist.

Someone knocked on the door. "Anybody in there?"

"I promise," he whispered to her, and picked her up off the table by wrapping an arm around her. He backed up until he felt a door behind him. She unwound herself from him to stand beside him, and he opened the door and pulled her inside, closing the door after them. He heard it click shut just as the cleaner turned on the light in the conference room.

“Where are we?” she whispered dazedly into his shoulder. A little light filtered around the edge of the door.

“We’re in a closet,” he whispered. “I hope to hell it isn’t a broom closet.”

“They don’t use brooms,” she said, and an electric sweeper began to whine outside the door.

There was no room to sit down, so he held her against him and she moved so that her breasts pressed into his chest. “I wasn’t finished, you know,” he whispered in her ear, and picked her up, easing himself back inside her, pinning her to the closet wall with his body. She wrapped her legs around him again, and he throbbed against her. He was being gentle and slow, and she bit him on the shoulder. “Harder,” she said, and he slammed himself against her, pulsing into her until she cried out weakly. He muffled her cries with his own, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in the same rhythm that his hips thrust against hers. Emily came again as she never had before, the muscles inside her clenching and expanding over and over while his tongue stroked her mouth. Then she heard him moan and felt him slump against her, holding her to the wall while he shuddered.

“Richard,” she said, and he kissed her.

“We’ve got to do this in a bed,” he whispered, touching her hair. “It’s so much easier.”

They held each other, kissing and touching wordlessly, until the cleaners left.

“Come home with me,” he said.

“I can’t.” Emily put her head on his chest. “I don’t have anything to wear tomorrow.”

And I’ve got to think about this, she told herself. Because this is more than I expected. This is more than I ever dreamed of.

But when they reached the street and he hailed a cab, he got in beside her and gave the driver his address.

In the back seat of the cab, he couldn’t seem to stop touching her, not to arouse her but almost as if he had to prove she was there beside him. He looked at her as if she was a miracle, touching her cheek, her hair, holding her hand. The smile in his eyes was more than just heat and lust. She felt loved and desired and claimed.

The claimed part bothered her.

“Richard...” she began.

“I want to make love to you all night.” He kissed her sweetly. She felt dizzy every time his mouth touched her.

“No, listen,” she said, and he laughed and kissed her again.

He was a great kisser.

He was a terrible listener.

When Richard got out at his apartment, he turned to help her out, but Emily pulled the door shut in his face and told the driver to go on. I want him again, she thought, but on my terms this time. Because if I don’t establish some kind of equality in our relationship pretty soon, I’m going to spend the rest of my life being ignored, humored, dictated to and put on hold.

Even to be with Richard, that’s too big a sacrifice.

Richard.

Oh, my God, Richard.

She leaned back in the cab and thought about him again and the way he’d moved against her, inside her. She closed her eyes and savored the memory. It was going to be a lot of work to get him to take her seriously, but he was worth it. He was worth everything.

* * *

“YOU’RE LOOKING VERY chipper this morning,” Jane said.

“Thank you.” Emily smiled smugly.

“Your underpants are on your desk.”

“What?”

“The cleaners found them in the conference room and put them on the lost-and-found bulletin board. Real clowns, those cleaners.”

“Does anybody know?”

“Absolutely not. I was the first one here. And I only knew they were yours because I bought them for you.”

“You get a raise.”

“Thank you. I deserve one. So who was the lucky man?”

“What man?” Emily said brightly, and went into her office.

An hour later, Jane buzzed her on the intercom. “The Hun would like to see you in his office. ASAP.”

I bet he does, Emily thought. He snaps his fingers, and I scurry up the stairs, and then he makes love to me on his office desk until I lose my mind. Well, actually, that last part sounds great, but I’m not going to his office. It’s time to make Richard start listening to me right now, because once we’re married, it’ll be too late.

Married? Emily swallowed, sandbagged by her own subconscious. Well, yes. Married. But on my terms, not his.

“Tell him I’m busy,” she said.

“Okay,” Jane said.

Emily spread the gem photographs that advertising had sent her across her desk. There really isn’t any choice, she thought, as she compared the paste to the gems. The fake stones were pale and dull, refusing to catch the light, while the rubies sparkled from inside and pulsed with color. She scribbled notes for a memo to Richard. Even he’s got to see the difference here, she thought. Even he should be able to spot the sizzle of the real thing.

The door opened, and without looking up, she said, “Jane, I’ve got a memo for Richard the Hun here.”

“Good,” Richard said. “I’ll take it.”

She looked at him over the top of her glasses. “Didn’t it occur to you to have my secretary announce you?”

He closed the door behind him and walked to the desk. “Your secretary is gone. And I need your memo on the stones now. I’ve got a report to make, you know.” He smiled down at her. “My reports go in on time.”

You are one arrogant SOB, she thought.

As if he’d read her mind, his smile widened, and her heart leaped to her throat. He leaned over and put his hands on the desk, and she remembered the last time he’d leaned over her, remembered where his hands and lips had gone. Her heart beat faster, and her breath came a little quicker.

Oh, no, you don’t, she told herself.

She forced herself to lean back in her chair and look up at him calmly. “I’ll have Jane send the memo right up,” she said, trying to keep the huskiness out of her voice. “It has my recommendations and the estimates.”

“What do I have to do to get it now?” he asked softly. I haven’t fooled him, she thought. Damn him. I’ve got to take control.

Jane’s voice came over the intercom. “George on line two.”

“I’ve got it.” Emily slid her chair back slightly to pick up the phone.

“Emily,” Richard said, trying to be stern. “The memo.”

Richard the Hun in action.

Emily suddenly found herself enjoying the situation. She covered the mouthpiece with her hand and grinned at him. “I’m busy. Get on your knees and grovel.” Then she turned back to the phone. “George! How wonderful to talk to you. You know, I was just saying to Jane, George and I don’t talk enough.”

“Emily?” George said.

“That’s me,” Emily said, batting her eyes at Richard. “What’s up?”

“Well...” George sounded confused. “I was just wondering how it was going with Richard? Everything all right?”

“Just great, George.” She stuck out her tongue at Richard. “Couldn’t have asked for a nicer guy to work with. Always asks, never orders. Great listener. Considerate, undemanding, a real liberated kind of guy.”

Richard raised his eyebrows at her. “You want to play games?” he asked. Then he walked around to her side of the desk and got down on his knees.

“What are you doing?” Emily said.

“Going over the last project totals,” George said.

“Cooperating,” Richard said. His hands slid over her knees and up to her waist, taking her skirt with them. Emily tried to put her knees together, but he thrust his body between them, spreading her legs farther apart and pulling her hips toward him.

“Stop it.” Emily tried to shove him back with her free hand.

“Now, Emily,” George said. “Relax. I’m not interfering with your project.”

“Relax.” Richard put his mouth against the softness of her inner thigh.

Emily moved her hand to his head and tried to push him away. Great day I picked to stop wearing panty hose and start wearing stockings, she thought wildly. Oh, God, what is he doing? We’re in my office, for heaven’s sake.

“Emily?” George said. “Emily, don’t be difficult about this.”

She twined her fingers in Richard’s hair and jerked his head up. He winced and pulled her hand away. “The garters are a good idea,” he said. “Don’t ever wear anything else.” And then he lowered his head again, clamping her hand at her side.

“Emily, will you please listen to me about this?” George said.

“I’m listening, George.” She tried to roll her chair away from Richard, but he pulled her in closer. His lips were tickling her inner thighs, his tongue flicking in and out. The tickling made her giggle, which was bad for her phone image, she knew. Of course, if George could see her now, her phone image would be the least of her problems. She tried hard to concentrate on George’s rambling, but Richard was much more interesting.

“Richard can do a lot for you, Emily,” George was saying.

“No kidding,” Emily said, trying to decide if she was more concerned about preserving her dignity or having great sex in the middle of the morning.

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