

LITTLE SECRETS: THE BABY MERGER

Yvonne Lindsay



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Аннотация

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"What? Did you forget to frisk me before I leave the building?"

"Don't tempt me, Sally," Kirk said.

"Don't be so pompous. You've lied to me from the moment you met me. Why not try being honest for a change?"

"You want honest? I'll give you honest. You caught my eye the second you arrived in the bar that night. I didn't recognize you immediately but I couldn't take my eyes off you."

She snorted. "I may be naive, but don't expect me to believe that. There were any number of women far more beautiful than me in the bar that night."

"And yet I only had eyes for you."

The look she gave him was skeptical. "A little clichéd, wouldn't you say?"

“Stop trying to put up walls between us.” Kirk stepped forward and took her by the arm. “You’re still carrying my baby,” he said. “I have a duty to care for...my child.”

He wasn’t holding her firmly, but he wasn’t letting go, either. It drove home the fact that the life she thought she’d had was not her own.

* * *

Little Secrets: The Baby Merger is part of the Little Secrets series: Untamed passion, unexpected pregnancy...

Little Secrets: The Baby Merger

Yvonne Lindsay



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A typical Piscean, USA TODAY bestselling author YVONNE LINDSAY has always preferred her imagination to the real world. Married to her blind-date hero and with two adult children, she spends her days crafting the stories of her heart, and in her spare time she can be found with her nose in a book reliving the power of love, or knitting socks and daydreaming. Contact her via her website, www.yvonnelindsay.com.

This one is dedicated to my family, each of whom hold a piece of my heart in their hands and whose love and support keep me going every day.

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[One](#)

A flash of pale gold hair near the entrance caught Kirk's

attention in the dimness of the bar. A woman came through the door, a tall, well-built man close behind her. She turned and said something, and the muscle looked like he was going to object, but then she spoke again—gesturing vaguely across the room—and he nodded and disappeared outside. Interesting, Kirk thought. Clearly the guy was an employee of some kind, perhaps a bodyguard, and he'd obviously been dismissed.

Kirk took a sip of his beer and watched the woman move through the area, searching for someone. There was an unconscious sensuality to the way she moved. Dressed down in a pair of slim-fitting trousers topped by a long-sleeved, loose tunic, she seemed to be trying to hide her tempting mix of curves and slenderness, but he saw enough to pique his interest. Most women hated it when they had well-rounded hips and a decent butt, and judging by the way she'd dressed to conceal, she was one of those women who wasn't a fan of her shape and form. But he was. In fact, he really liked her shape and form.

Who was she meeting here? A partner, he wondered, feeling a small prick of envy as his eyes skimmed her from head to foot. The weariness that had driven him here tonight in search of better company than employee files and financial forecasts slid away in increments as his eyes appreciatively roamed her body.

He knew the instant she saw the person she was looking for. Her features lit up, and she raised a hand in greeting, moving more quickly now toward her target. Kirk scanned ahead of her, feeling himself relax when he saw the couple who reached out

to greet her affectionately. Not a partner, then, he thought with a smile and took a sip of the malty craft beer he'd ordered earlier.

He noticed one of her friends pass her a martini and pondered on the fact that they'd already ordered her drink for her. Obviously she was a reliable type, both punctual and predictable. Too bad those were not the traits of someone who might be interested in a short, intense fling, which was all he was in the market for. He had his life plan very firmly set out in front of him, and while his company's merger with Harrison Information Technology here in Bellevue, Washington, would definitely fast-track things, a committed relationship was still not in the cards for a long time. When he was ready, he'd tackle that step the way he did everything else, with a lot of research and dedication to getting it right the first time. Kirk Tanner did not make mistakes—and he definitely wasn't looking for love.

Kirk turned his attention away from the woman, but something about her kept tickling at the back of his mind. Something familiar that he couldn't quite place. He looked across the room and studied her more closely, noting again the swath of pale gold hair that fell over her shoulders and just past her shoulder blades. Even from here he could see the kinks in her hair that told him she'd recently had it tied up in a tight ponytail. His fingers clenched around his glass, suddenly itching to push through the length of it, to see if it felt as silky soft as it looked.

As if she sensed his regard, the woman turned and glanced past him before returning her attention to her friends. This gave

him the most direct view so far of her face—and yes, there was definitely something familiar about her. He'd certainly have remembered if he'd met her before but perhaps he'd seen her photograph somewhere.

Kirk searched his eidetic memory. Ah, yes, now he had it—Sally Harrison, the only child of Orson Harrison, the chairman of Harrison Information Technology. The very firm his own company was officially merging with at 3:00 p.m. tomorrow. The idea of a merger with Sally Harrison held distinct appeal, even though he knew she should be strictly off-limits.

Her personnel file had intrigued him, although the head shot attached to it had hardly done her justice. He scoured his memory for more details. Since high school she'd interned in every department of the head office of HIT. In fact, she probably knew more about how each sector of the company ran than her father did, and that was saying something. She'd graduated from MIT with a PhD in social and engineering systems. And yet, despite her experience and education and the fact she was the chairman's daughter, she'd apparently never aspired to anything higher than a mediocre middle-management position.

Granted, her department was a high performer and several of her staff had been promoted, but why hadn't she moved ahead, too? Was she being very deliberately kept in place by her father or other senior staff? Was there something not noted in her file that made her unqualified or ill-suited for a more prominent position in the company?

And—the more compelling question—did she perhaps have sour grapes about her lack of advancement?

Her knowledge about the firm made her a prime candidate for the investigation her father had asked him to undertake as part of his staff evaluation during the merger.

Under the guise of seeing where staff cutbacks needed to be made, he was also tasked with investigating who could most likely be responsible for what could be unwitting or deliberate leaks to HIT's largest business rival. Orson suspected that the rival company, DuBecTec, was accumulating data to undermine his company with a view toward making a hostile takeover bid in the next few months. He had instructed Kirk to look at everyone on the payroll very thoroughly. Everyone including the very appealing Ms. Sally Harrison.

Kirk took another sip of his beer and watched her across the room. She'd barely sipped her drink yet but swirled the toothpick in her martini around and around. Just then, as he was watching, she removed the toothpick from her drink and, using her teeth and her tongue, drew the cocktail onion off the tip and crunched down. His entire body clenched on a surge of desire so intense he almost groaned out loud.

Sally Harrison was a very interesting subject indeed, he decided as he willed his body back under control. And before he left the bar tonight, he would definitely find a way to get to know her better.

* * *

Company merger. For the best.

Even though she was going through the motions, saying all the right things as her friends excitedly told her about their recent honeymoon, Sally couldn't stop thinking about her father's shocking announcement over dinner tonight. If she hadn't heard it straight from the horse's mouth, she would have struggled to believe it. She still struggled to believe it. And the fact that her father hadn't shared a moment of what had to have been an extensive forerunner to the merger with her raked across her emotions.

It was a harsh reminder that if she was the kind of person who actually stood with her father, versus sheltering behind him, she'd have been a part of the discussions. Not only that, if she'd been the kind of person she ought to be, confident and charismatic instead of shy and intense, this entire merger might not even have been necessary.

Her whole body trembled with a sense of failure. Oh, sure, logically she knew that her dad wouldn't have entered into this planned merger if it wasn't the best thing for Harrison IT and its thousand or so staff worldwide. And it wasn't as though he needed her input. As chairman of HIT, he held the reins very firmly in both hands, as he always had. But, until now, HIT had been the family firm, and darn it, she was his family. Or at least she was the last time she'd looked.

Of course, now the company would be rebranded—Harrison Tanner Tech. Clearly things were about to change on more than

one level.

She could have predicted her father's response when she'd questioned the secrecy surrounding the merger.

"Nothing you need to worry about," he'd said, brushing her off in his usual brusque but loving way.

And she wasn't worried—not about the company, anyway. But she did have questions that he'd been very evasive about answering. Like, why this particular other company? What did it bring to HIT that the firm didn't have already? Why this man, whoever he was, who was being appointed vice president effective tomorrow? And why did her dad want her to be there during the video link when he and the new vice president of the newly branded Harrison Tanner Tech would make the merger announcement simultaneously to the whole staff? She couldn't think of anything she'd rather do less. Aside from the fact that she hated being in the public arena, how on earth would she look her colleagues in the eye afterward and possibly have to face their accusations that she'd known about this merger all along? Or worse, have to admit that she hadn't. Just the thought of it made her stomach flip uneasily.

Her father had always told her he worked hard so she didn't have to. She knew he worked hard. Too hard, if the recent tired and gray cast to his craggy features was anything to go by. It was another prod that she hadn't pulled her weight. Hadn't been the support he deserved and maybe even needed. Not that he'd ever say as much. He'd protected her all her life, which hadn't abated

as she'd reached adulthood. To her shame, she'd let him.

Thing was, she wanted to work hard. She wanted to be a valued member of HIT and to be involved in the decision making. She wished she could shed the anxiety that led to her always hovering in the shadows and allowing others to run with her ideas and get the glory that came with those successes. Okay, so not every idea was wildly successful, but her phobia of speaking in groups had held her back, and she knew others had been promoted over her because of it. Her personality flaws meant she wasn't perceived to be as dynamic and forward thinking as people in upper management were expected to be.

When her crippling fear had surfaced after the death of her mom, and when years of therapy appeared to make no headway, her father had always reassured her that she was simply a late bloomer and she only needed time to come into her own. But she was twenty-eight now, and she still hadn't overcome her insecurities. She knew that was a continual, if quiet, disappointment to her father. While he'd never said as much, she knew he'd always hoped that she could overcome her phobia and stand at his side at HIT, and she'd wanted that, too. She'd thought he was still giving her time. She hadn't realized he'd given up on her. Not until today.

This latest development was the last straw. Her father had always included her in his planning for the firm, even implemented an idea or two of hers from time to time, but this he'd done completely without her.

The shock continued to reverberate through her. The writing was on the wall. She'd been left in the dark on this major decision—and in the dark was where she'd stay going forward unless she did something about it. She couldn't make excuses for herself anymore. She was a big girl now. It was past time that she stretched to her full potential. If she didn't, she'd be overlooked for the rest of her life, and she knew for sure that she didn't want that. Things had to change. She had to change. Now.

Gilda and Ron were still laughing and talking, sharing reminiscences as well as exchanging those little touches and private looks that close couples did all the time. It was sweet, but it compounded the sense of exclusion she felt at the same time. In her personal life as well as in the workplace, the people around her seemed to move forward easily, effortlessly, while she struggled with every step. She was happy for the others, truly—she was just sad for herself.

When they both looked at their watches and said they needed to be on their way, she didn't object. Instead she waved them off with a smile and stayed to finish her barely touched drink.

She should go home to her apartment, get an early night—prepare for the big announcement tomorrow. Should? It felt like all her life Sally had done what should be done. Like she'd spent her life striving to please others. But what about her? Change had to start from a point in time—why couldn't that change start now? Why couldn't she be bold? Accept new challenges?

“Ma'am? The gentleman over there asked me to bring you

this.”

A waitress put another Gibson on the table in front of her. Sally blinked in surprise before looking up at the girl.

“Gentleman?”

“Over there.” The waitress gestured. “He’s really hot.”

“Are you sure it was for me?” she asked.

“He was quite specific. Did you want me to take it back?”

Did she? The frightened mouse inside her quivered and said, oh, yes. But wasn’t that what she would have done normally? In fact, since she’d dismissed her personal security, wouldn’t she normally have left with Gilda and Ron and shared a cab so she wouldn’t be left on her own like this? Open to new experiences? Meeting new people? Flirting with a man?

Sally turned her head and met the gaze of the man in question. She’d noticed him before and rejected him as being way out of her league. Hot didn’t even begin to describe him. He wore confidence as easily as he wore his dark suit and crisp, pale business shirt, top button undone. Sally felt every cell in her body jump to visceral attention as his eyes met hers. He nodded toward her, raised his glass in a silent toast, then smiled. The kind of smile that sizzled to the ends of her toes.

Be bold, a little voice whispered in the back of her mind. She turned her attention to the waitress and gave the girl a smile.

“Ma’am?”

“Leave it. Thank you. And please pass on my thanks.”

“Oh, you can do that yourself. He’s coming over.”

Coming over? Sally's fight-or-flight reflexes asserted themselves in full screaming glory, shrieking, take flight! like a Klaxon blaring in the background.

"May I join you?" the man said smoothly, his hand hovering over the back of the chair Gilda had recently vacated.

"Certainly." Her pulse fluttered at her throat, but she managed to sound reasonably calm. She lifted her glass and tipped it toward him in a brief toast. "Thank you for the drink."

"You're welcome. You don't see many people drinking a Gibson these days. An old-fashioned drink for an old-fashioned girl?"

His voice was rich and deep and stroked her nerves like plush velvet on bare skin. And he certainly wasn't hard on the eyes, either. He filled his suit with broad shoulders, and the fine cotton of his shirt stretched across a chest that looked as though it had the kinds of peaks and valleys of toned muscle that a woman like her appreciated but oh so rarely got to indulge in. His face was slightly angular, his nose a straight blade, and his eyes—whatever color they were, something light, but it was hard to tell in here—looked directly at her. No shrinking violet, then. Not like her. His lips were gently curved. He didn't have the look of a man who smiled easily, and yet his smile didn't look fake. In fact, he actually looked genuinely amused but not in a superior way.

Not quite sure how to react, she looked down at her drink and forced a smile. "Something like that."

Sally looked up again in time to see him grin outright in

response. Seeing his smile was like receiving an electric shock straight to her girlie parts. Wow. Shouldn't a man need a license to wield that much sex appeal?

"I'm Kirk, and you are?" He offered her his hand and quirked an eyebrow at her.

Sally's insides turned to molten liquid. Normally, she wouldn't give in to a drink and a slick delivery like the one he'd just pitched, but what the hell. She was fed up with being the good girl. The one who always did what was expected. The one who always deferred to others and never put herself forward or chased after what she wanted. If she wanted to make a stand in anything in her life, she was going to have to do things head-on rather than work quietly and happily in the background. Hadn't she just decided tonight to take charge of her life and her decisions? For once, she was going to do exactly what she wanted and damn the consequences.

She put out her hand to accept his. "I'm Sally. Next round is on me."

"Good to meet you, although I have to warn you, I don't usually let women buy me drinks."

Sally felt that old familiar clench in her gut when faced with conflict. The kind of thing that made her clam up, afraid to speak up for herself. It was one of her major failings—another thing she hid behind. But she'd told herself she wouldn't hide tonight. She pasted a stiff smile on her lips. Pushed herself to respond.

"Oh, really? Why is that?"

“I’m kind of old-fashioned, too.”

She couldn’t stifle the groan that escaped her. Despite being head of a leading IT corporation, her dad was also the epitome of old-fashioned. The very last thing Sally needed in her life was another man like that.

“But,” he continued, still smiling, “in your case I might be prepared to make an exception.”

Taken aback, she blurted, “In my case? Why?”

“Because I don’t think you’re just buying me a drink just so you can take advantage of my body.”

She couldn’t help it. She laughed out loud. Not a pretty, dainty little titter—a full-blown belly laugh.

“Does that happen often?” she asked.

“Now and again,” he admitted.

“Trust me, you’re quite safe with me,” she reassured him.

“Really?”

Was it her imagination, or did he sound a little disappointed?

“Well, perhaps we should wait and see,” she answered with a smile of her own and reached for her martini.

Two

How had it gone from a few drinks and dancing to this? Sally asked herself as they entered his apartment. Kirk threw his jacket over the back of a bland beige sofa. She got only the vaguest impression of his place—a generic replica of so many serviced apartments used by traveling business people with stock-standard wall decorations and furnishings. The only visible sign of human

occupation was the dining table piled high with archive boxes and files.

That was all she noticed before his hands were lifting her hair from her nape and his lips pressed just there. She shivered at the contact. Kirk let her hair drop again and took her hand to lead her through to his bedroom. He turned to face her, and she trembled at the naked hunger reflected in his eyes.

Be bold, Sally reminded herself. You wanted this. Take charge. Take what you want.

She reached for his tie, pulling it loose, sliding it out from under his collar and letting it drop to the floor. Then she attacked his buttons, amazed that her fingers still had any dexterity at all given how her body all but vibrated with the fierceness of her longing for this man. A piece of her urged her to slow down, to take care, to reconsider, but she relegated that unwelcome advice to the very back of her mind. This was what she wanted, and she would darn well take it, and him, and revel in the process.

Kirk didn't remain passive. His large, warm hands stroked her through the fabric of her tunic, which, beneath his touch, felt like the sexiest thing she'd ever worn. She sighed out loud when she pushed his shirt free of his body and skimmed her hands over the breadth of his muscled shoulders, following the contours of his chest. While they'd danced, she'd been able to tell he was in shape, but, wow, this guy was really in shape. For a second she felt uncomfortable, ashamed of her own inadequacies—her small breasts, her wide hips, her heavy bottom. But then Kirk bent his

head and nuzzled at the curve of her neck, and the sensation of his hot breath and his lips against her skin consigned all rational thought to obscurity.

For now everything was about his touch. She was vaguely aware of Kirk reaching for the zipper at the back of her tunic and sliding it down, then deftly removing her trousers, and felt again that prickle of insecurity as he eased the garment off her body, exposing her pretty lace bra and her all too practical full briefs.

She stifled a giggle. “Sorry, I wasn’t quite expecting this outcome when I dressed for today.”

“Never apologize,” he ordered. His voice was deep and held a tiny tremor, which gave her an immense boost of confidence. “You’re beautiful. Perfect, in fact. And, for the record, I happen to find white cotton incredibly sexy.”

She looked at his face—studying it to see if he was serious or if he was simply saying what he thought she needed to hear—but there was an honesty there in his features that sent a new thrill through her. She bracketed his cheeks with her hands and pulled his face down to hers, kissing him with all that she had in her. With just a few well-chosen words, he’d made her feel valued, whether he knew it or not.

She couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment he unhooked her bra, but she would remember forever the first time his hands cupped her breasts. His touch was reverent but firm. His fingers, when they caressed her nipples, teasing but gentle. Unable to help herself, Sally arched her back, pressing herself against his palms,

eager to feel more. She was no shrinking virgin, but she'd never experienced this kind of responsiveness before in her life. Right now she was lost in sensation and anticipation of his next move.

When he lowered his mouth to capture one taut nipple, she keened softly in response. Her legs felt like jelly, as if they could barely support her, and at her core her body had developed a deep, drawing ache of need.

“Perfect,” he whispered against her wet and sensitive bud, sending another shiver through her body that had nothing to do with cold and everything to do with an inferno of heat and desire.

Kirk's hands were at her hips a moment later, easing her panties down over her thighs. She stepped out of them, for the first time in her adult life unembarrassed by her nakedness.

“It seems you have me at a slight disadvantage here,” she said with a teasing smile.

“I'm all for equal opportunity.” He smiled in return and spread his hands wide so she could reach for his belt buckle.

She wasn't sure how he did it, but he managed to make shedding his shoes, socks, trousers and boxer briefs incredibly sexy. Or maybe it was just that she was so looking forward to seeing him naked, to having the opportunity to investigate every curve of muscle and every shadow beneath it, that every new inch of bared skin aroused her even more.

His skin peppered with goose bumps as she trailed her hand from his chest to his lower abdomen. His erection was full and heavy, jutting proudly from his body without apology or shame.

“You do that to me,” he said as she eyed him.

Again he made her feel as though she was the strong, desirable one here. The one with all the authority and control. Without a second thought, she wrapped her fingers around his length, stroking him and marveling at the contradiction in impressions—of the heated satin softness of his skin and the steel-like hardness beneath it.

Somehow they maneuvered onto the bed. Again an exercise in elegance rather than the convoluted tangle of limbs she'd always experienced in the past. Sally had never known such synchronicity before. Exploring his body, listening to and watching his reactions as she did so, became the most natural thing in the world. Despite the sense of urgency that had gripped her at the bar, right now she wanted to take all the time in the world. Kirk, too, seemed content to go along for the ride, to allow her the time to find out exactly what wrung the greatest reactions from him, how to take him to the edge of madness and how to bring him slowly down again.

And then it was his turn. His hands were firm and sure as they stroked her, his fingers nimble and sweet as they tweaked and tugged and probed until she was shaking from head to foot. Wanting to demand he give her the release her body trembled for, yet wanting him to prolong this torturous pleasure at the same time. And all the while he murmured how beautiful she was. How perfect. It was the most empowering experience of her life.

When he finally sheathed himself and entered her body, it was

sheer perfection. Her hips rose to greet him, and as he filled her she knew she'd never known anything quite this exquisite and might never know anything to match it again. Tonight was a gift. Something to be cherished. All of it—especially the way he made her feel so incredibly wanted when he groaned and gripped her hips as he sank fully within her.

“Don’t. Move,” he implored her as she tightened her inner muscles around him.

“What? Like this?” She tightened again and tilted her hips so he nestled just that little bit deeper.

“Exactly not like that.”

She did it again, savoring the power his words had given her. Savoring, too, each and every sensation that rippled through her body at how deliciously he filled her. He growled, a deep, guttural resignation to her demands and began to withdraw. Then he surged against her. This time it was Sally who groaned in surrender. Her hands tightened on his shoulders, her short, practical nails embedded in his skin. She met him thrust for thrust, her tension coiling tighter and tighter, until she lost all sense of what was happening and felt her entire being let go in a maelstrom of pleasure so mind-blowing, so breathtaking she knew nothing in her life would ever be the same again.

As she lay there, heart still hammering a frantic beat, her nerve endings still tingling with the climax that had wrung her body out, she thought it such a shame that this was to be only a one-night stand. A woman could get used to this kind of lovemaking.

But not a woman like her, she reminded herself sternly. She had a career path to follow. A life to build and a point to prove, to herself if to no one else. Throwing herself into another doomed attempt at building a satisfying relationship would only distract her from her goals. She had to take this rendezvous for what it was—a beautiful anomaly—and then thank the nice man for the lovely ending to the night before getting dressed and going home.

She couldn't quite bring herself to do it. To pull away and leave the welcoming warmth of his embrace, to end the age-old connection of their bodies. Kirk murmured something in her ear and rolled to one side, bringing her with him until she was half sprawled over his body. Oh, but he was magnificent, she thought as she studied his upper torso. How lucky was she to have met him tonight? She lowered her head on his chest and listened to his heart rate as it changed from racing fast to a slower, more even beat. His breathing, too, changed, and his fingers stopped playing with her hair.

He was asleep. Five more minutes and it was time to go. Gently she extracted herself from his arms and tiptoed around the bedroom gathering up her things. A quick trip to the bathroom to tidy up and get dressed and she was out of here. No sticking around for embarrassment in the cold light of morning. No recriminations or awkwardness over breakfast.

She let herself out of the apartment and slipped her phone from her bag. She'd just opened an app to order a cab when her phone—put on silent when she'd gone out to meet her friends

—lit up with an incoming call. She recognized the name on the screen immediately. Marilyn had been her father’s PA since before she was born and had become a mother figure to Sally after her own mother’s death. But it was late, after midnight. What on earth was Marilyn doing calling her now?

“Hello?” Sally answered as the elevator doors opened onto the lobby.

“Where are you?” Marilyn asked sharply. “I’ve been trying to call you for the past two hours.”

There was a note to the older woman’s voice that Sally had never heard her use before. She identified it immediately as fear and felt her stomach drop.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, getting straight to the point.

“It’s your father. He came back into his office tonight, and security found him while they were on their rounds. He’s had a heart attack and he’s at the hospital now. It’s bad, Sally, really bad.”

A whimper escaped her as she took a mental note of the details of which hospital he was at.

“Where are you?” Marilyn asked. “I’ll send Benton with the car.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m not far from the hospital. I’ve got a cab coming already. Are you there now?”

“Of course,” the PA answered. A note of vulnerability crept into her voice. “But they won’t tell me anything because I’m not next of kin.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. I promise.”

Waiting for the cab was the longest five minutes of her life, and as it pulled away from the curb, Sally wondered how life could turn on the dime like that. How, in one moment, everything could be perfect and exciting and new, and in the next all could be torn away.

She should never have left her father after dinner tonight, especially on the eve of something as big as tomorrow’s merger announcement. But how was she to know he’d go back into the office and, of all things, have a heart attack? And why had the security guards called Marilyn instead of her? Surely she, as his daughter, should have been listed on the company register as his immediate next of kin? But then, he’d always sheltered and protected her, hadn’t he?

She remembered how drawn he’d looked tonight. How she’d dismissed it so easily as nothing out of the ordinary. She hadn’t even asked if he was feeling ill. Guilt assailed her. He hadn’t wanted to worry her about the merger, so why would he worry her about not feeling well? Suddenly her decision to be bold and chase after her own pleasure without thinking of the consequences tonight seemed horribly pathetic and selfish. If she’d simply gone home after her friends had left the bar, she’d have gotten the call and been at the hospital hours ago. What if she arrived too late? She didn’t know what she’d do if she lost her dad. He was her rock, her mainstay, her shelter.

“Hold on, Daddy,” she whispered. “Please, hold on.”

* * *

Always an early riser, Kirk woke as sunlight began to filter through the blinds, his body satiated like it had never been before. He took a moment to appreciate the feeling and decided he could definitely go for another round of that. He reached across his sheets for Sally's warm, recumbent form beside him and came up with empty space. When had she pulled away from him? It wasn't like him to sleep so deeply that he couldn't remember his bed partner leaving, but then again he'd all but lost consciousness after the force of passion they'd shared.

Maybe she was in the bathroom. He looked across the bed to where light should have gleamed around the bathroom door frame, but there was only darkness. He sat up and cast his gaze around the room looking for her clothes. They were gone, as was she.

It shouldn't have mattered—after all, he knew he'd see her again at the office, even if she wasn't aware of that little detail just yet. But there was something almost shameful in the way she'd slipped out of his room without saying goodbye. As if she was embarrassed by what they'd done or wanted to pretend it hadn't happened.

Well, maybe it hadn't been as good for her as it was for him. He shook his head and told himself not to be so ridiculous. He knew she'd been there with him, every step of the way. Sometimes leading, sometimes allowing herself to be led. In fact, just thinking about her reactions—the sweet sounds she'd made,

the responsiveness of her body beneath his touch—brought his desire immediately to full, aching life again.

Kirk groaned and pushed back the covers, remembering he hadn't rid himself of the condom he'd miraculously had the presence of mind to slip on last night. The groan rapidly turned into a string of wild curses when he realized the condom wasn't intact. He went to the bathroom and took care of what was left of it.

Now wide awake, several scenarios ran through his head. Of course, she could be on the Pill. Goodness only knew he hadn't stopped to ask. He'd barely stopped to put on protection himself, for all the good it had done. Either way, he had to tell her, and soon. He wondered how that would go. It's not like he could wait for her dad to introduce them at the office and shake her hand and say, "Hi, about last night...the condom broke."

He heard his cell phone ringing from the sitting room and walked, naked, to retrieve it from his suit jacket. He recognized the number as Orson Harrison's private line and answered immediately, surprised to hear a woman's voice, though she quickly introduced herself as Marilyn, Orson's assistant, and explained the medical emergency from the night before. His blood ran cold as he heard the news.

"Assemble the board as quickly as you can," he instructed Harrison's PA. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Three

Kirk's head was still reeling. At the emergency board meeting,

everyone had been shocked to hear the news of Orson's heart attack, but all had agreed that the company could show no weakness, especially when Orson's confidential report on his reasoning behind the merger had been presented to them. Therefore, they'd appointed Kirk interim chairman.

The new responsibility was a heavy weight on him, along with worry for Orson Harrison's health. And on top of all that, he still had to tell Sally about the possibility she might be pregnant. He closed his eyes for a brief moment. He'd been such a fool to allow desire to cloud his judgment. It was the kind of impulsive emotion and need-driven behavior he'd always sworn he'd never indulge in. And now look where it had landed him.

He was investigating her, just as he was investigating every staff member here—he never should have allowed sex to muddy the waters.

He had no doubt she wouldn't be happy to hear his news. Who would be, especially while her father's life hung in the balance? So far the hospital had released very little information—only that Orson was in critical condition. Even Marilyn, who'd known Orson for almost thirty years, had been trying on the phone all morning, and remained unable to get past the gatekeeper of patient details at the hospital. To be honest, Kirk had been surprised to see the woman at her desk this morning and he'd expressed as much. She'd curtly informed him that someone had to hold the place together in Orson's absence and had been ill-pleased when she'd been informed of his appointment as interim

chairman.

Kirk flicked a glance at his watch. Perhaps she'd gotten ahold of Sally again by now. He hit the interoffice button to connect with the prickly PA.

"Any updates regarding Mr. Harrison?" he asked.

"No, sir." The woman's voice was clipped.

She'd made it quite clear that she wasn't happy about him using Orson's office—interim appointment or not. She was even less impressed when he'd ignored her protests and taken up residence. It made sense to him to stand at the helm right now, when he was supposed to be steering this particular ship. It would help the staff to see someone visibly taking charge. Well, the staff except for Marilyn.

"Thank you, Marilyn," Kirk replied, keeping his voice civil. "And Ms. Harrison? Has there been any communication with her yet?"

"I believe she's in the building but I haven't spoken to her myself, yet."

Kirk looked at his watch. Two thirty. They were going forward with the planned announcement of the merger—it was, after all, the only thing that would explain why Kirk had taken temporary leadership—and the video link announcement was scheduled to commence at three sharp. Did Sally still plan to be there? He knew her father had wanted her by his side, but in light of recent events, he wouldn't blame her for skipping out. Coming into the office at all couldn't have been an easy decision to make with her

father so desperately ill.

“Could you get a message to her and ask her to come to my office as soon as possible? I want to brief her before the video link.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Again there was that brief hesitation and slight distaste to her tone as she said the word sir. He'd already asked her to call him by his first name, but it seemed his request had been ignored. That, however, wasn't important to him right now. He had a far greater concern on his hands. Like, how the hell did he tell Sally about the condom?

It was only a few minutes before he heard women's voices outside the office door. The double doors began to swing open, and he heard Marilyn's voice call out in caution.

“Oh, but there's someone—”

And there she was. Sally Harrison appeared in the doorway, her head still turned to Marilyn, a reassuring smile on her face. A smile that froze then faded into an expression of shock when she saw him rise from behind her father's desk.

“K-Kirk?” she stammered.

Her face paled, highlighting the dark shadows of exhaustion and worry beneath her eyes that even makeup couldn't disguise. Kirk moved swiftly to her side, aware of Orson's PA coming up behind Sally. He gently guided Sally into a chair.

“A glass of water for Ms. Harrison, please, Marilyn,” Kirk instructed the PA, who raced to do his bidding.

She was back in a moment, and Kirk took the glass from her before pressing it into Sally's shaking hand.

"Mr. Tanner, it's really too much to expect her to attend the video link," Marilyn began defensively. "She shouldn't have to —"

"It's entirely up to Ms. Harrison. Marilyn, perhaps you could get something for her to eat. I bet you haven't had anything today, have you?" he asked, looking at Sally directly.

Sally shook her head. "No. I couldn't bear to think about food."

She tried to take a sip of the water. Her hand was shaking so much Kirk wrapped his fingers around hers to steady her and keep her from spilling. She flinched at his touch, a reaction he was sure Marilyn hadn't missed.

"You need to eat something," he said. He turned to the PA. "Could you get a bowl of fruit from the executive kitchen for Ms. Harrison and perhaps some yogurt, as well?"

"Is that what you want, Sally?" Marilyn asked, moving to Sally's other side. "Perhaps you'd rather I stayed here with you while Mr. Tanner got you something to eat."

Kirk bit back a retort. He wasn't about to enter into a battle of wills with Marilyn here and now. And given the time constraints that now faced them, he wouldn't be able to have the discussion with Sally that they really needed to have. He studied her from the top of her golden head to her sensibly clad feet. Even in a demure pale blue suit and with her hair scraped back into a

ponytail that gave him a headache just looking at how tightly it was bound, she still affected him.

Could she already be pregnant with his child? The thought came like a sucker punch straight to his gut.

“Good idea,” he said, making a decision to leave their discussion until they could be guaranteed more privacy and uninterrupted time.

Of greater importance was letting Sally come to terms with his presence here—and the fact that he’d kept it from her last night. Once the shock wore off, he had no doubt matters between them would be less than cordial, especially once she discovered that he’d known exactly who she was all along.

Sally looked from him to Marilyn. “It-it’s okay, Marilyn. You know what I like. Perhaps you could get it for me? I really am feeling quite weak.”

“Of course you are,” Marilyn said in a more placatory tone and patted Sally on the shoulder. “You’ve always had a delicate constitution. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Marilyn closed the door behind her with a sharp click, leaving Kirk in no doubt that even though Orson’s PA had left the room to do his bidding, she certainly wasn’t happy about it.

“Have another sip of water,” he urged Sally.

He was relieved to see a little color coming back into her face.

“How is your dad doing?” he asked, determined to distract her until Marilyn’s return.

She drew in another deep breath. “He’s in an induced coma

and they say he's stable—whatever that means. It's hard to see it as anything positive when he looks so awful and is totally nonresponsive." Her voice shook, but she kept going. "They're hoping to operate tomorrow. A quadruple bypass, apparently."

Kirk pressed a hand on her shoulder. "I know your dad. He's strong, he'll come through."

She looked up at him and he saw a flash of anger in her blue eyes.

"Just how well do you know my dad?"

Kirk felt a swell of discomfort, with just a tinge of rueful amusement. Trust Orson's daughter to cut straight to the chase. "I've known him most of my life, to be honest."

"And how is it I've never met you before last night?"

There was still a slight tremor to her voice, but he could see her getting stronger by the minute.

"Our parents were friends until my father died. After that my mom and I moved away. I was a kid at the time. There was no reason for you to know me before last night."

He kept it deliberately brief. There wasn't time for detail now.

"And now you're back." She fell silent a moment before flicking him another heated look. "You knew all along who I was, didn't you?"

Kirk clenched his jaw and nodded. He'd never been the kind of person who lived on regret, but right now, if he could have turned back the clock and done last night over again, he absolutely would have. Or would he? He doubted she'd have

come home with him if she'd known he'd soon be her boss. Would he have missed the chance to lose himself in her arms the way he had? Never have known the perfect passion they'd experienced together? Never had the broken condom, the snarky voice in the back of his mind sharply reminded him. Okay, so he'd have skipped that part.

"I see." Sally swallowed another sip of water before speaking again. "She called you Mr. Tanner. That would be the Tanner in Harrison Tanner Tech? The new vice president?"

He nodded.

She pressed her lips together before speaking. "It seems you had me at a disadvantage right from the start. Which asks the question why you'd do something like that. Did it give you a kick to sleep with the chairman's oblivious daughter? Never mind—don't bother answering that."

Sally waved her hand as if to negate the words she'd just uttered.

"Look, can we talk about that later, over dinner?"

"I do not want to go out to dinner with you. In fact, I don't even want to be in the same room as you."

Her cheeks had flushed pink with fury. At least that was better than the waxen image she'd presented to him only a few moments ago.

Marilyn returned to the office and set a small tray on Sally's lap.

"There you are, my dear. Goodness knows, with your father so

ill, the last thing we need is you collapsing, too. I've been telling your father for years now that he needs to slow down, but do you think he listens to me?" As if suddenly aware of the leaden atmosphere between Kirk and Sally, Marilyn straightened and gave Kirk a pointed glare. "Is there anything else...sir?"

"No, thank you, Marilyn. That will be all for now," Kirk replied. He flicked a quick look at his watch. "Eat up," he instructed Sally. "We have fifteen minutes."

"I don't feel like eat—"

"Please, Sally, at least try. It'll boost your blood sugar for now and hopefully tide you through the next few hours," Kirk said. "Whether you like it or not, we have to work together, today in particular. The last thing I want—and, as Marilyn already pointed out, the very last thing Harrison Tanner Tech needs—is you collapsing live on camera, especially during the merger announcement and even more so when news of your father's heart attack becomes public knowledge."

They locked gazes for what felt like a full minute before Sally acceded to his request and began to spoon up mouthfuls of the fruit.

"I still don't want to go out for dinner with you," she muttered between bites.

"We need to talk about last night, and we don't have time now."

"I don't particularly wish to discuss last night. In fact, I'd rather forget it ever happened."

Her words were cutting. Her anger and distrust right now felt like a palpable presence in the room. Such a contrast to the sweet openness she had shown him last night. And the tension between them was only going to get worse when she heard what he had to tell her. There was a knock at the door, and one of the communications team popped his head in.

“Ten minutes, Mr. Tanner! We need you miked and sound checked now.”

“And me, too,” Sally interjected in a shaking voice.

“Are you sure, Ms. Harrison?”

It wasn't Kirk's imagination—she paled again. But in true Harrison spirit, she placed her bowl on the desk in front of her and rose to her feet. She straightened her jacket and smoothed her hands over her rounded hips. Yes, there was still a tremor there.

“Absolutely certain. Let's get this over with,” she said tightly.

“You don't have to speak. In fact, you don't have to do anything at all. I can handle the announcement.”

“Really? Do you think that's a good idea given that people will be expecting to see my father? A man they know and trust—” she paused for emphasis “—and instead they're getting you?”

There was enough scorn in her voice to curdle milk.

“They can trust me,” he said simply. “And so can you.”

“You'll excuse me if I find that hard to believe.”

* * *

Sally wished she hadn't eaten a thing. Right now she felt sick

to her stomach. How dare Kirk have hidden his identity from her like that? What kind of a jerk was he? Was this some form of one-upmanship, lording his conquest over her before he'd even started here—making sure she knew exactly who was the top dog? And what if he tried to hold their one-night stand over her?

Sally stiffened her spine and looked him straight in the eyes. “In my father’s absence, I would prefer to make the announcement regarding the merger. You can fill in the details afterward. It’s what Dad would want.”

The sick sensation in her stomach intensified at the thought of being the figurehead for making the company-wide statement. But she could do this. She had to do this, to save face if nothing else. Kirk looked at her for a few seconds then shrugged and reached across the desk to grab a sheaf of papers. He held them out to her.

“Here’s the statement your father prepared yesterday. If you’re sure you can handle it, I have no objection to you making the announcement and then I’ll field any questions from the floor. After the Q and A from the video feed closes, we’ll repeat the same again for the press announcement.”

“Why will you be answering questions? Why not Silas Rogers, the CEO, or any of our other senior management?”

“Sally, your father and I have been working together in the lead-up to this for several months now. No one else can give the answers I can. I’m the one who can carry out the plans your father and I made—that’s why I’ve been appointed interim chairman.

The board gave their approval at the meeting that was called this morning.”

This morning. While she'd been at the hospital, out of her mind with worry over her father's condition. Her mind latched onto one part of what he'd said and yanked her out of her brief reverie.

“Several months?” Sally couldn't stop the outburst. “But I didn't hear about it until yesterday!”

“It was your father's decision to keep everything under wraps for as long as possible. Obviously he'd hoped to do the announcement with me today, present a united front and all that, but since he can't, we'll do the next best thing. Are you okay with that?”

Okay with it? No, she wasn't okay with it—any of it. But her dad had thought of everything, hadn't he? And none of it, except for a rushed dinner together last night, had included her.

“Sally?”

“Let me read the statement.”

Sally scanned the double-spaced pages, hearing her father's voice in the back of her mind with every word she read. It wasn't right. He should be here to do this. This company was his pride and joy, built on his hard work, and he respected each and every one of his employees so very highly. Somehow she had to remember that in what she was about to do. Somehow she had to put aside her phobia and be the kind of person her father should have been able to rely on.

With every thought, she could feel her anxiety levels wind up several notches. Be bold, she told herself. You can do this. She drew in another deep breath then stood up and met Kirk's gaze.

"Right, let's go."

"Are you sure? You'll be okay?"

Blue-green eyes bored into hers, and she felt as though he could see through her bravado and her best intentions and all the way to the quivering jelly inside. He knew. Somehow, probably through her father, he knew about her glossophobia—the debilitating terror she experienced when faced with public speaking. Shame trickled down her spine, but she refused to back down.

"I'll be fine," she said, forcing a calm into her voice that she was far from feeling. "It's a video link, isn't it? Just us and a camera, right?"

"Look, Sally, you don't have to—"

She shook her head. "No, trust me, I really do."

He might not understand it, but this had become vital to her now. A method of proof that she was worthy. A way to show her father, when he was well enough to hear about it, that she had what it took and could be relied upon to step up.

Kirk gave her a small nod of acceptance. "Fine. Remember I'll be right beside you."

She'd been afraid he'd say that. But as they walked out of her dad's office and down the carpeted corridor toward the main conference room, she felt an unexpected sense of comfort in his

nearness. She tried to push the sensation away. She didn't want to rely on this man. A man she knew intimately and yet not at all. Don't think about last night! Don't think about the taste of him, the feel of him, the pleasure he gave you.

She needn't have worried. Last night was the last thing on her mind as they entered the conference room and she was immediately confronted by the single lens of a camera pointing straight toward her. And beyond it was a bank of television screens on the large wall of the conference room—each screen filled with faces of the staff assembled at each of their offices. All of them staring straight at her.

Four

Kirk felt the shift in Sally's bearing the second they entered the conference room. He cast her a glance. She looked like she was on the verge of turning tail and running back down the corridor. She'd already come to a complete halt beside him, her eyes riveted on the live screens on the other side of the room, and he could see tiny beads of perspiration forming at her hairline and on her upper lip. And, dammit, she was trembling from head to foot.

“Sally?” he asked gently.

She swallowed and flicked her eyes in his direction. “I can do this,” she said with all the grimness of a French aristocrat on her way to the guillotine.

Sally walked woodenly toward the podium set up in front of the camera. The sheaf of papers he'd given her earlier was

clutched in one fist, and she made an effort to smooth them out as she placed them on the platform in front of her.

He had to give it to her. She wasn't backing down, even though she was obviously terrified. He wished she'd just give in and hand the papers back over to him. Making her go through this was akin to punching a puppy, and the idea made him sick to the stomach. Probably about as sick as she was feeling right now.

The camera operator gestured to Kirk to take the other seat and Kirk hastened to Sally's side. As he settled beside her, he could feel tension coming off her in waves. She'd grown even paler than when they'd arrived.

"Sally?" he asked again.

"Five minutes until we go live!" someone said from across the room. "Someone get mikes on them, please."

Kirk reached across and curved his hand around one of hers. "Let me do this. I've had time to prepare. You haven't."

He held his breath, waiting for her reply, but they were distracted by two sound technicians fitting them each with a lapel mike and doing a quick sound check.

"One minute, people."

Kirk squeezed her hand. "Sally, it's your call. No one expects this of you. Least of all your father—and especially given the circumstances."

"Don't you see," she whispered without looking at him. "That's exactly why I need to do it."

"Ten, nine, eight..."

“You only have to be here, Sally. That’s more than enough given what you’ve been through.”

“Live in three...” The technician silently counted down the last two numbers with his fingers.

Kirk waited for Sally to speak, but silence filled the air. Sally was looking past the winking red eye of the camera to the screens across the room, to the people of Harrison IT. Then, infinitesimally, she moved and slid the papers over to him. Taking it as his cue, Kirk pasted a smile on his face and introduced himself before he launched into the welcome Orson had prepared for his staff, together with a brief explanation that a medical event had precluded Orson from participating in the announcement.

Sally stood rigidly beside him throughout the explanation of the merger and the question-and-answer session that followed. The moment he signed off and the red light on the camera extinguished, Sally ripped off her microphone and headed for the door. He eventually caught up with her down the hallway.

“Leave me alone!” she cried as he reached for her hand and tugged her around to face him.

Kirk was horrified to see tears streaking her face.

“Sally, it’s all right. You did great.”

“Great? You call sitting there like a barrel of dead fish great? I couldn’t even introduce you, which, in all honesty, was the very least I should have done given you are a total stranger to most of those people.”

Distraction was what she needed right now.

“Dead fish? For the record, you look nothing like a barrel of anything, let alone dead fish.”

She shook her head in frustration, but he was glad to see the tears had mostly stopped.

“Don’t be so literal.”

“I can’t help it.” He shrugged. “When I look at you, the last thing I picture is cold fish of any kind.”

He lowered his voice deliberately and delighted in the flush of color that filled her cheeks, chasing away the lines of strain that had been so evident only seconds before.

“You’re impossible,” she muttered.

“Tell me how impossible over dinner after the press conference.”

“No.”

“Sally, we need to talk. About last night. About now.”

He could see she wanted to argue the point with him, but he spied one of their media liaison staff coming down the corridor toward them. He was expected at the press conference right away.

“Please. Just dinner. Nothing else,” he pressed.

He willed her to acquiesce to his suggestion. Not only did he need to talk to her about the broken condom, but he found himself wanting to get to know her better away from the confines of the office. He didn’t realize he was holding his breath until she gave a sharp nod.

“Not dinner. But, yes, we can talk. I’m heading back to the

hospital for a few hours first. I'll meet you later in my office. You can say what you have to say there.”

It wasn't quite the acceptance he'd aimed for, but for now it would do. He watched her walk away and head to the elevators.

“Mr. Tanner, they're waiting for you downstairs in conference room three.”

He reluctantly dragged his attention back to the job at hand. Unfortunately for him, Sally would have to wait.

* * *

It was late, and most of the staff had already headed home. The media session had run well over time, and afterward he'd been called into an impromptu meeting with the CEO and several others. The board might have agreed to appoint him interim chairman, but the executives still wanted to make it clear that they were the ones in charge. But he'd handled it knowing he had Orson's full support at his back, and that of the board of directors, too.

Now, he had a far more important task at hand. Kirk loosened his tie and slid it out from beneath his collar as he approached Sally's office. He bunched the silk strip into his pocket and raised a hand to tap at her door. No response. He reached for the knob, turned it and let himself in.

The instant he saw her, motionless, with her head pillowed on her arms on the top of her desk, he felt a moment of sheer panic, but then reason overcame the reaction and he noted the steady breathing that made her shoulders rise and fall a little.

She'd removed her jacket before sitting at her desk, and the sheer fabric of her blouse revealed a creamy lace camisole beneath it.

Desire hit him hard and deep, and his fingers curled into his palms, itching to relieve her of her blouse and to slide his hands over the enticement that was her lingerie. He doubted it was quite as silky soft as her skin, but wouldn't it be fun to find out?

No, he shouldn't go there again. Wouldn't. Whatever it was about Sally Harrison that drew him so strongly, he had to rein it back. Somehow. It would be a challenge when everything about her triggered his basest primal instincts, but—he reminded himself—didn't he thrive on challenges and defeating obstacles? He forced himself to ignore the sensations that sparked through his body and focused instead on the reality of the woman sleeping so soundly that she hadn't heard him knock or enter her office.

She had to be exhausted. She'd been through a hell of a lot in the past twenty-four hours. Any regular person would have struggled with the onslaught of emotions, let alone someone forced to be part of a video conference who suffered a phobia like hers. Orson had forewarned him that Sally experienced acute anxiety when it came to public speaking. He'd had no idea how severe it was or the toll it obviously took. Having seen her like that today went a long way toward explaining why she'd remained in a safe middle-management role at HIT rather than scaling the corporate ladder to be at her father's side.

He'd never before seen such despair on a person's face at the thought of talking in public and, he realized, he'd never before

seen such bravery as she'd exhibited in pushing herself to try. Perhaps if she hadn't been so emotionally wrung out, she'd have been in a stronger position to attempt to conquer her demons today. But she hadn't and, from their conversation in the hall, he knew she saw that as a failure.

He made an involuntary sound of sympathy, and she shifted a little on the desk before starting awake and sitting upright in her chair.

"What time is it?" she demanded defensively, her voice thick with exhaustion. "How long have you been waiting?"

There was a faint crease on her cheek where she'd rested her face on the cuff of her sleeve. Oddly, it endeared her to him even more. This was a woman who needed a lot of protecting—he felt it to the soles of his feet. She was the antithesis of the kind of women he usually dated, and yet she'd somehow inveigled her way into a nook inside him that pulled on every impulse.

"Not long," he answered. "And it's late. I'm sorry, I got held up. How was your dad?"

"As well as can be expected. He's still stable and continues to be monitored, and they're confident he'll come through the surgery well tomorrow."

As well as can be expected. It was an awful phrase, he thought, remembering hearing the exact same words from the medical team who had looked after his mother after the first of the strokes that stole her from him.

Sally pushed up from her desk and stood to face Kirk. "But

you didn't come here to talk about him, did you? What did you want to say to me?"

"I was hoping we could discuss it over dinner. I don't know about you, but I'm starving after today."

"I thought we were going to talk here," she hedged.

"Can't we kill two birds with one stone?"

"Look—" she sighed "—is this really necessary? There's no need to spend an hour making small talk over a meal before we get to the point. We're both adults, so surely we can continue to act as such. I'm quite happy to forget last night ever happened."

Kirk ignored the sting that came with her words. He couldn't forget last night even if he wanted to—especially not now. "And, as adults, we should be able to enjoy a meal together. Really, I could do with a decent bite to eat, and I'm sure you could, too."

She looked at him and for a moment he thought she'd refuse, but then she huffed out a breath of impatience.

"Fine. I'll let my security know I'm leaving with you."

Ah, that explained the muscle who'd accompanied her to the bar last night. "You have security with you whenever you're out?"

"One of the examples of Dad's overprotectiveness. When I was little and HIT was beginning to boom, there was a threat to kidnap me. Ever since he's insisted on me having a bodyguard. Trust me, it's not as glamorous as it sounds."

"It's hardly overprotective," Kirk commented as he helped Sally into her suit jacket. "Your father clearly takes your welfare seriously."

He felt a pang of regret as she buttoned up the front of her jacket, hiding the tempting glimpses of lace visible through her blouse.

“He likes to know I’m safe.”

“I protect what’s mine, too,” Kirk replied firmly.

Sally raised her eyebrow. “Isn’t that a little primitive?”

“Perhaps I should rephrase that. Like your father, I take my responsibilities very seriously.”

“Well, considering you’re standing in for my father at the moment, I guess I should find that heartening.”

Kirk smiled. “I will always do my best by the company—for your dad’s sake, if nothing else. You can be assured of that. He has my utmost respect.”

“You say you’ve known him most of your life, and yet I had no idea he even knew you. No idea at all.” For a second she looked upset, but then she pulled herself together. “Let me call Benton and then we can go.”

He could see it really bothered her that her father hadn’t shared anything about the merger until the ink was drying on the paperwork. But was that because she was disturbed her father had made those decisions without consulting her, or because she had something to hide? Kirk couldn’t be absolutely sure either way.

She made the call, and in the next few minutes they were riding the elevator to the basement parking. Kirk led the way to his car—a late-model European SUV.

“You must be relieved for your dad. That he’s stable, I mean.”

“I’ll be relieved when I know he’s getting better again.” She looked away, but he couldn’t mistake the grief that crossed her face. “He was so gray when I left him this afternoon. So vulnerable. I’ve never seen him like that. Not even when Mom died. And he still has a major surgery to get through.”

“Your father has more strength and determination than any man I’ve ever met, and he’ll be receiving excellent care at the hospital. He’ll come through this, Sally.”

The words seemed to be what she needed to hear to pull herself together again. She looked up and gave him a weak smile. For a second he caught a glimpse of the woman he’d danced with last night, but then she was gone again. Kirk waited for Sally to settle in the passenger seat and buckle her seat belt before he closed her door and went around to the other side. She was still pale, but she appeared completely composed and in control. Not quite the woman he’d met last night, but not the woman caught in the grip of the anxiety attack from this afternoon, either.

He pulled out of the parking garage and headed down the road.

“Any preference for dinner?”

“Something fast and hot.”

“Chinese okay, then?”

“Perfect.”

A few blocks down, he pulled into the parking lot for a chain restaurant he knew always had good food.

“Looks like this is us.”

He rushed around to her door and helped her from the car and they were seated immediately.

“A drink?” he asked Sally when the waiter came to bring their menus.

“Just water, thank you.”

Probably a good idea for both of them, he thought, and gave his request for the same to the waiter. “Do you mind if I order for us?”

Sally shook her head, and he turned to the waiter and requested appetizers to be brought out to their table as soon as possible and ordered a couple of main entrées to share, as well.

Her lips pulled into a brief smile. “You really are hungry, aren’t you?”

Sally slipped out of her jacket and put it on the seat beside her. He looked at her across the table, noting again the imprint of her lacy camisole beneath her blouse. “You could say that,” he replied with a wry grin.

Oh, yes, he was hungry for a lot of things, but only one of his desires would be satisfied by this meal tonight. To distract himself, he also shrugged off his jacket and undid the cuffs on his shirt and began to fold them back. He looked up and saw Sally’s gaze riveted on his hands. Even in the dim light of the restaurant, he saw the rose pink stain that crept over her cheeks and her throat. Was she remembering exactly what parts of her body his hands had touched last night? Did she have any idea of

how much he wanted to touch her again?

As if she sensed his gaze, she shook her head slightly and stared off into the distance, watching the other diners. Then, with a visible squaring of her shoulders, she returned her attention to him.

“Okay, so what was so important that you couldn’t tell me at work?”

Kirk shifted in his chair. “It’s about last night—” He paused, searching for the right words.

* * *

Sally felt her cheeks flush again. Did they really need to hash this all out? She’d much rather they just moved on.

“We covered this already,” she interrupted. “Yes, it’s awkward that we’re working under the same umbrella after spending last night together. It happened, but it won’t happen again. I’m sure we can be grown-up about it all and put it very firmly in the past. It doesn’t have to affect our working relationship, such as it will be, and I’d prefer we just forget about it entirely.”

She ran out of breath. Kirk eyed her from across the table.

“Are you quite finished?”

“Finished?”

“Your commendable little speech.”

“Oh, that. Yes, I’m done.”

“Great. I’d like to agree with you. However, we have a problem.”

Sally looked at him in confusion. Did he think he couldn’t

work with her? She knew he'd mentioned redundancies in his announcement today. Surely he didn't mean to dismiss her from her job? Could he even do that? Was that what this dinner was about? Cold fingers of fear squeezed her throat shut.

"A problem?" she repeated.

"The condom broke."

Five

Of all the things he could have said, that was the last she'd expected. Sally felt the tension inside her coil up a few more notches. The condom broke? It kind of put her fear of redundancy in the shade, didn't it? She became aware that Kirk was watching her intently, waiting for her reaction. She forced herself into some semblance of composure. He'd seen her at her absolute worst already today—she couldn't afford to appear that weak to him again.

"Is that all?" She smiled tightly. "For a second there, I thought you were about to give me notice that you were terminating my job."

"You thought I was going to terminate you? Hell, no. But seriously, Sally—the condom. You have to let me know if—"

"You really have nothing to worry about," she interrupted him. She didn't want to hear him verbalize the words that were on the tip of his tongue. Didn't want to believe that pregnancy was a possibility, even though children were something she'd always desperately wanted. But not until it was the right time and, more importantly, with the right man. Certainly not with a man who

would hide his identity and sleep with her while knowing exactly who she was.

“I’m on the Pill,” she continued. “We’re fine. Absolutely, totally and utterly fine.”

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