

SEX, LIES AND THE CEO

Barbara Dunlop



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Sex, Lies and the CEO

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Seducing the boss is the best way to uncover the truth in this story from USA TODAY bestselling author Barbara Dunlop After his ex writes a tell-all book, CEO Shane Colborn is battling a PR nightmare. The last thing he needs is an affair with another woman, especially one who works for him. But Darci Rivers proves impossible to resist. Their passion is intense, but so is Darci's secret. She's out to discover a truth that could redeem her father's legacy—and destroy Shane's company, taking him down with it. Will she do what she's come to do...and risk the once-in-a-lifetime connection she's found with her boss?

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“Would you come here?” Shane asked in a soft tone.

A wave of longing washed through her. Darci recognized the danger, but she was so tempted. His voice was deep, persuasive. “Nobody takes off their clothes, and no hands below the waist.” “Can you stick to those rules?”

“I can if you can.”

“I can.” She had no choice.

He smiled. Heart thudding, she took the three steps that brought her in front of him. He reached for her hand and drew her into his arms.

She knew she shouldn’t relax. Still, she couldn’t help herself. Just for a few minutes, she promised. Darci felt the strength and the intimacy of his body pressed to hers. It was taut and sexy, and absolutely forbidden.

* * *

Sex, Lies and the CEO is part of the Chicago Sons series: Men who work hard, love harder and live with their fathers’ legacies ...

Sex, Lies

and the CEO

Barbara Dunlop



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BARBARA DUNLOP writes romantic stories while curled up in a log cabin in Canada’s far north, where bears outnumber people and it snows six months of the year. Fortunately she has a brawny husband and two teenage children to haul firewood and clear the driveway while she sips cocoa and muses about her upcoming chapters. Barbara loves to hear from readers. You can contact her through her website, www.barbaradunlop.com.

For my son

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[One](#)

“Don’t answer that,” Darci Rivers called out, rushing across the hardwood floor of the cluttered loft apartment.

“It’s not going to be him,” said Jennifer Shelton as she dug into her purse.

Darci slid on sock feet around a pile of packing boxes while the phone jangled again. “It’s him.”

“It’s not—” Jennifer glanced at the display on her phone. Then she looked up at Darci. “It’s him.”

Darci deftly scooped the phone from her roommate’s hand. “You *will not* give in.”

“I won’t give in.” Even as she spoke, Jennifer cast a longing glance at the phone.

“He’s dead to you,” said Darci, waving the phone for emphasis as she backed a safe distance away.

“Maybe he’s—”

“He’s not.”

“You don’t know what I was about to say.”

Darci hit the end button to cancel the call and tucked the phone into the front pocket of her jeans. “You were going to say ‘maybe he’s sorry.’”

Jennifer pursed her lips together. “Maybe he is.”

Darci angled for the kitchen area of the open-concept space. A sloped wall of glass stretched up beside her, overlooking the distant Chicago skyline. Skylights decorated the high ceiling, while two lofts bracketed either end of the spacious, rectangular room.

The phone rang again, vibrating inside her pocket.

“Give it back,” said Jennifer, following behind.

Darci rounded the end of the island counter. “What was it you said to me last night?”

“It could be a client.”

“*What* was it you said to me?”

“*Darci.*”

“If it’s a client, they’ll leave a message.”

It was nearly seven o’clock on a Tuesday night. Though Darci and Jennifer prided themselves on being easily available to clients of their web-design business, it wouldn’t kill them to miss one call.

“What kind of customer service is that?”

Darci pulled the phone out of her pocket to check the display. “It’s him.” She declined the call and tucked the phone away.

“Something could be wrong,” said Jennifer, taking another step.

Darci couldn’t help but smile at that. “Of course something’s wrong. He only just realized you were serious.”

On the counter, she located a packing box labeled “wine rack” and peeled it open. She’d wisely packed the corkscrew with the wine bottles for easy access after the move. Now, if she could only remember which carton held the glasses.

She pointed at another box on the island. “Check the white one.”

“You can’t hold my phone hostage.”

“Sure I can. You made me swear I would.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“No backsies.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You said, and I quote, *don’t ever let me talk to that son-of-a-bitch again*. I think the wineglasses are in the white box.”

Jennifer clamped her jaw.

Giving up, Darci reached out and pulled the carton closer to her, stripping off the wide packing tape. “He cheated on you, Jen.”

“He was drunk.”

“He’s going to get drunk again, and he’s going to cheat on you again. You don’t even know if that was the first time.”

“I’m pretty sure—”

“*Pretty sure?* Listen to yourself. You need to be 100 percent positive he never has and never will, or else you have to walk.”

“You are so idealistic.”

“Aha.” Darci had located the wineglasses. She extracted a pair of them and turned to the sink to give them a rinse.

“Nobody can ever know for sure,” said Jennifer.

“Are you listening to yourself?”

There was a long silence before Jennifer spoke. “I’m trying hard not to.”

Darci grinned as she shook water droplets from the wet glasses. “There you go. Welcome back, girl.”

She turned back to the breakfast bar, and Jennifer slid up onto one of the counter stools. “He’s just so...”

“Self-centered?”

“I was thinking *hot*.” Jennifer absently bent back the flaps of the cardboard box closest to her.

“There has to be more to a man than buff pecs and a tight butt.”

Jennifer gave a shrug as she peered into the depths of the box.

“Tell me I’m right,” said Darci.

“You’re right.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

Jennifer drew a heavy sigh and extracted a stack of old photo albums, setting them on the countertop. “I mean it. Can I have my phone back?”

“No. But you can have a big glass of this ten-dollar merlot.”

The two women had consumed plenty of cheap wine together. They’d been best friends since high school and had both won scholarships to Columbia, in graphic design. They’d roomed together for four years, sharing opinions, jokes and secrets.

Darci would trust Jennifer with her life, but not with Ashton Watson.

Her best friend had a weak spot when it came to the smooth-talking charmer. She’d dumped him three times in the past four months, but each time he’d waxed eloquent, swearing he’d be more thoughtful, less self-centered. And each time, she’d taken him back.

Darci wasn’t about to let it happen again. The man had no clue how to be in a couple.

Jennifer extracted three thick manila envelopes from a box in front of her and set them beside the photo albums. “I’m not thirsty.”

“Yes, you are.” Darci pushed one of the glasses across the wide counter.

Jennifer dug down and removed a worn leather wallet from the box, then turned the case over in her hands. “This is your dad’s stuff?”

“It’s from his top dresser drawer.” Darci gazed at the small collection of her father’s things. “I packed it away when I cleared out his apartment. I was too emotional to look through it that day.”

Jennifer looked worried. “You want me to leave it alone?”

Darci knew there was no point in procrastinating any longer. She perched on the other stool and took a bracing sip of the wine. "I'm ready. It's been three months."

Jennifer reached back into the carton and came up with an old wooden box.

"Cigars?" she asked.

"I only ever saw him smoke cigarettes."

"It looks pretty old." Jennifer sniffed at the wood. "Cedar."

The lid was secured with a small brass clasp, and she slipped it free.

Darci felt more curious than distressed. She still missed her father every day, but he'd been sick and in pain for many months before his death. And though she didn't know all the details, she knew he'd been in emotional pain for years, likely since her mother had taken off when Darci was a baby. She was beginning to accept that he was finally at peace.

Jennifer raised the lid.

Darci leaned in to look.

"Money," said Jennifer.

The revelation confused Darci.

"Coins." Jennifer lifted a row of plastic sleeves containing gold-and-silver coins. "It looks like a collection."

"I sure hope they're not valuable."

"Why would you hope that?"

"He struggled for years to make ends meet. I'd hate to think he deprived himself and saved these for me."

"He was still buying single malt," said Jennifer.

Darci couldn't help but smile at the memory. Born and raised in Aberdeen, Ian Rivers swore by a strong, peaty Scotch.

"What's this?" Jennifer pulled a folded envelope from beneath the coins. A photograph was tucked in the fold, and she drew it out.

Darci checked the picture. "That's definitely my dad."

Ian was standing in a small, sparse office, his hand braced on a wooden desk. She flipped the photo, but nothing was written on the back.

Jennifer opened the unsealed envelope.

"A coin appraisal?" Darci guessed, taking a sip of her wine.

"A letter."

"To my dad?"

It must have had significant sentimental value. Darci couldn't help but wonder if it was a love letter. She even dared to hope it was from her mother, Alison. Though Alison Rivers had never contacted them, it would be nice to think she might have thought about them once in a while.

"It's *from* your dad. To someone named Dalton Colborn."

Darci's stomach did a flip. She hadn't heard the name in years.

Jennifer glanced up at the silence. "You know him?"

"I never met him. He owned Colborn Aerospace. And he was once my Dad's business partner."

"Your dad was involved in *Colborn Aerospace*?"

"It was a different company they had together, D&I Holdings. I don't know much about it, and it all ended when I was just a baby." Darci gazed at the picture. "Dalton and my dad were both engineers. They opened a company together, but it all fell apart, apparently quite badly. For as long as I can remember, Dad would fly into a rage whenever he saw the Colborn name."

"There's a thirty-two-cent stamp on it," said Jennifer. "Never mind old, that's ancient. It was never mailed."

The flap on the envelope gaped open.

"Read it," said Darci.

“You sure?”

Darci slugged back a swallow of wine. “I’m sure.”

* * *

Shane Colborn sent the fuchsia hardcover skittering across his wide cherrywood desk. Justin Massey, head of the legal department at Colborn Aerospace, trapped it before it could drop to the floor.

“Well, that’s a new low,” said Shane.

He hated reading about himself. Business articles were bad enough. The tabloids were worse, but they were mercifully short. This mess was appalling.

“There’s no way to stop it from being released,” said Justin. “We were lucky to get our hands on this copy.” He paused. “So, how much of it is true?”

Shane struggled to clear the anger from his brain. “I don’t know. Are you looking for a number?”

“Sure. Give me a number.”

“Twenty, maybe thirty percent. The dates and places and events are all accurate. But I sure don’t talk like an eighteenth-century poet in bed.”

Justin’s face broke into a grin.

“Shut up,” Shane ordered.

“I never said a word.”

Shane pushed back his leather desk chair and stood, his anger level rising instead of falling. “I didn’t flirt with other women when she was in the room. And cheap? *Cheap?* I don’t think the woman glanced at a price tag the entire time we were dating. Limos, restaurants, clothes, parties. I bought her a blue-diamond bracelet for her birthday last March.”

It was a purchase he now regretted. He didn’t mind the cost, but there was something intimate about diamonds, particularly those in a custom setting. But Bianca had pouted and whined prettily until he’d given in. He had to admit, no matter how ugly this breakup became, he was relieved to be out from under her complaining.

“I’m most worried about chapter six,” said Justin.

“Where she accuses me of collusion and corporate espionage?”

“Clients really don’t care what you’re like in bed. But they do care if you’re price-fixing or stealing their intellectual property.”

“I’m not.”

“I know you’re not.”

It was reassuring for Shane to hear that his lawyer trusted him. “It sounded like you wanted me to answer that.”

“I’m not the one you have to convince.”

Shane nodded at the book with the crass cover. “Is there a way for me to rebut?”

“Not unless you want a he-said-she-said battle in the media. You know Bianca will do all the local talk shows. Any move you make prolongs the story.”

“So I stay silent.”

“Yes.”

“And let them think I’m a pansy in the sack?”

“I’ll be advising our clients that the espionage and collusion accusations are ridiculous. I could mention your sex life, if you’d like.”

“You’re a real comedian.”

“I try. Have you heard anything from Gobrecht this week?”

Shane shook his head.

Gobrecht Airlines was headquartered in Berlin, and they were in the final stages of awarding a contract for twenty new commuter jets. The Colborn Aware 200 was the front runner. If Gobrecht

made a commitment to buy, Beaumont Air in Paris was likely to follow suit with an even larger contract.

Justin backed toward the office door. "I know your public profile has always been good for business. But can you please try to stay out of the headlines for a while?"

"I've never tried to get into them. I thought Bianca knew the score."

Bianca had been introduced to Shane by the Millers. She was the daughter of their good friend, so Shane had assumed she'd grown up around wealthy, high-profile people. It never occurred to him that she'd gossip in public. And it sure never occurred to him that she'd write a supposed tell-all book for money.

"It's impossible to know who to trust," said Justin.

"I trust you."

"I'm contractually obligated to be trustworthy."

"Maybe that's what I should do next time." Shane was only half joking. "Have my dates sign a nondisclosure agreement before the appetizers."

"It might be better if you don't date for a while."

"That doesn't sound like much fun."

"Read a book. Take up a hobby."

"Like golf or fishing?"

"Not a lot of fishing in the greater Chicago area. But you could golf."

"Tried it once. I'd have to hang myself." Shane shuddered at the memory.

"You do know it's not about the ball. It's about the conversation."

"Boring people play golf."

Justin paused beside the closed door. "Powerful people play golf."

"I'd rather scuba dive or target shoot."

"Go for it."

Shane had considered both of those things, dreaming of a long weekend in the Keys or a rustic lodge in Montana. "It's a little hard to find the time."

"Now that you've given up dating, you'll have nothing but time on your hands."

"There's a board meeting on Friday. We break ground on the new wing of the R & D facility Wednesday morning. Then I'm hosting the search-and-rescue fundraiser at the mansion next Saturday night." Shane paused. "And I'm not going stag to that."

"Sure you are."

"Uh, no, I'm not."

"Then find a nice, safe date," said Justin. "Take your cousin."

"Madeline is *not* going to be my date to the fundraiser."

"Why not? She could be your hostess. It's not the same as a date."

"That's pathetic. I'm not going to look pathetic at my own party."

"You won't look pathetic. You'll look shrewd. The trick here is to give the media *absolutely nothing* to report."

"You don't think they'll report that I'm dating my cousin?"

"They'll report that you and Madeline were impeccable hosts and that Colborn raised hundreds of thousands for the search-and-rescue service."

Shane's instinct was to argue. But he forced himself to think it through. Was cohosting with Madeline really the safe route?

He knew she'd do it for him. She was a sweetheart. Would it deflect public criticism? More importantly, would it protect his privacy?

Justin spoke up again. "There's a fine line between keeping your company in the public eye and becoming a social-media spectacle."

"I've crossed it, haven't I?"

“Bianca crossed it for you.”

Shane capitulated. “Fine. I’ll call Maddie.”

“Good decision.”

“You do know I have a 100 percent success rate, getting lucky after that particular party.”

“You do know those women are sleeping with the billionaire persona and not the man, right?”

“The family mansion has to be good for something.”

The Barrington Hills house had been in his family for decades. But it was an hour commute to downtown. And what single man needed fourteen acres and seven bedrooms?

Shane mostly lived at his Lake Shore Drive penthouse—three bedrooms, a fantastic view and close to any number of fine restaurants.

“I’m sure your father would be proud of how you’re using the family assets,” Justin drawled.

Shane couldn’t help but smile at the memory. His dad had been gone for six years now, tragically killed along with Shane’s mother in a boating accident when Shane was twenty-four. He missed them both. And although Justin was being sarcastic, Dalton wouldn’t have had the slightest problem with Shane’s love life.

Shane heard his assistant, Ginger, over the intercom. “Mr. Colburn? A Hans Strutz is on the phone from Gobrecht Airlines.”

He and Justin exchanged a worried look.

Shane reached out to press the intercom button on his desk phone. “I’ll pick it up.”

“Thank you, sir. Line one.”

“Thanks, Ginger.” He took a bracing breath. “Well, this could be really good or really bad.”

Justin reached for the door handle. “Call me when you’re done.”

“I will.” Shane punched line one.

* * *

Darci sat perched on a bus-stop bench across the busy street from the Colborn Aerospace headquarters. The June sunshine glinted on the giant royal blue sign, which stretched across the front of the building. The twenty-one story structure was two blocks from the river, overlooking a small park.

Her father’s unmailed letter had been a revelation. It explained Ian’s bitterness, his rages at Dalton Colborn and likely his fondness for Scotch, which had increased as the years went by. The letter accused Dalton of betraying Ian, of stealing and patenting her father’s next-generation turbine design.

It seemed Ian and Dalton had been best friends for years, until Dalton got greedy and stole everything for himself. Ian’s letter had threatened a lawsuit. He wanted money, sure. But he also wanted professional recognition for his invention. Dalton had won a prestigious award for the turbine, gaining fame that had translated into wealth and skyrocketing growth for Colborn Aerospace, while Ian’s marriage had broken up and he had spiraled into depression and obscurity.

The letter stated that there was irrefutable proof of Ian’s claim in the company’s records. He said his original, signed schematic drawings were hidden away in a place where only he could find them. He’d wanted a court order to retrieve the designs and force Dalton to come clean.

But the letter was never mailed. And Darci could only guess at the reasons her father might have changed his mind. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to tip Dalton off, to risk Dalton finding the drawings and destroying them. If so, why hadn’t he called a lawyer? Or maybe he had.

She realized she’d probably never know.

Now she sat staring at the Colborn Aerospace building and wondered if the proof could possibly be inside. Were there papers moldering in a basement filing cabinet that showed her father was a brilliant engineer? If there were, how could she get her hands on them?

She watched people walk in and out of the building, alone, in pairs, in groups. Some were obviously executives and office staff. Some were maintenance workers. Some were likely clients and customers.

She could walk into the lobby right now, and nobody would stop her. Though there was probably security to keep her from getting much farther than that. Maybe she'd ask to see Shane Colborn. Maybe she'd march right up to him and demand to see the historical files.

Then again, maybe that would be stupid. Shane was likely as selfish and greedy as his father. If he learned there was proof of his family's dishonesty, there was no way he'd let her hunt for it. Instead, he'd be the one to find it and destroy it.

A bus rolled along the curb. Its air brakes groaned as it came to a stop and blocked her view. A few people stepped off while others boarded, then it pulled away, diesel engine grinding loudly before the sounds mingled with the other traffic.

Children squealed in the park beside her. Birds swooped from aspens to maple trees. The wind freshened the air, blowing away the exhaust from the four-lane thoroughfare.

It was lunchtime, and hundreds of people moved through the park and along the sidewalks. More entered the Colborn building. More came out.

Staring at the imposing stone structure, Darci knew the smart thing to do was walk away. She should forget the letter existed and carry on with her regular life. She could head back to her car, return to the loft and finish unpacking her belongings.

It was Friday. She and Jennifer were going to the Woodrow Club tonight. They'd meet up with some friends from Columbia, have a few drinks, maybe run into some nice guys. Who knew? This could be the night she met her soul mate.

Not that she was necessarily fixating on meeting Mr. Right. She'd like to get married someday, settle down, have kids. Who wouldn't? But she was in no hurry.

Her and Jennifer's web-design business was growing at a very satisfying pace. They'd planned a vacation in New York City for July. They had reservations at a hotel on Times Square and tickets to three shows. It was going to be fantastic.

Another bus passed, but it didn't stop.

She gazed over the tops of the cars and taxis, staring at the glass doors that led to the Colborn Aerospace lobby, while speculating on what kind of a person could get access to the basement. A repairman, perhaps. She could rent a uniform, buy a toolbox and pretend she was from the telephone or the electric company.

Too bad she didn't know a fuse from a resistor.

Maybe she could deliver a pizza.

A woman headed up the stairs to the front doors, then paused to smooth her skirt, seeming to brace herself before reaching for the door handle. She looked young, nervous and self-conscious.

Job interview, Darci concluded.

Then she sat up straight, a lightning bolt flashing in her brain.

Job interview.

Employees of Colborn Aerospace could wander all over the building. They would have security access, possibly even door keys. Nobody would question their right to be there. And they could chat up the other employees, find out where company records were kept, browse through them under one pretext or another, probably find anything they wanted about the company's history.

That was the answer. She'd apply for a job, go to work for Colborn. It was a brilliant plan.

Two

Under normal circumstances, Darci's guilt alone would have stopped her from crashing any party anywhere, never mind one that hosted the who's who of Chicago. But a week into her new job at Colborn Aerospace, she'd learned the oldest records were kept at the Colborn mansion. Tonight was her best chance to look around inside.

She'd rented a four-thousand-dollar, beaded, gold silk evening gown, splurged on a pair of sparkling heels and shelled out a fortune for hair and makeup at the swankiest salon in her neighborhood. If she did say so herself, she looked fabulous. At a passing glance, nobody would guess that she didn't belong among the rich and influential.

Now she just needed to get through the front door.

At the top of the semicircular staircase, a butler was discreetly checking invitations. Darci hovered at the edge of the driveway, wondering how best to approach him, but she didn't dare stand still too long or she'd call attention to herself.

A gray-haired couple brushed past her. The woman was dressed in a dramatic peacock-blue gown with a diamond brooch at the shoulder. Making a split-second decision, Darci fell into step beside the woman.

"That's a lovely brooch," she said to her as they walked.

Luckily, the woman turned and gave her a friendly smile. "Thank you. It's Cartier."

Darci frowned. "Oh dear. You have a little crease." She boldly reached to the fabric above the brooch, pretending to smooth it out.

"May I confirm your invitation, sir," the butler said to the older man.

Darci's heart thudded as the man handed him a card.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Saunders," said the butler.

"There we go," Darci said to the woman, keeping her gaze studiously fixed on the dress, pretending she was part of the Saunders party. "That looks much better."

"Thank you." The woman, obviously Mrs. Saunders, nodded her appreciation.

Another couple stepped up behind them, drawing the butler's attention, and Darci quickly moved forward.

Her heart was still thudding wildly as they went through the stately front doors and into the huge foyer.

"Enjoy your evening," she managed to say to Mrs. Saunders.

"Enjoy yours," Mrs. Saunders replied.

Darci peeled off to the right, anxious to mix in with the nearest crowd.

"Champagne, ma'am?" asked a neatly uniformed waiter.

"Thank you." Darci helped herself to a crystal flute from his tray.

She had no intention of consuming any alcohol, but holding the glass would make her look more like a genuine guest.

Earlier in the week, she'd started a job in the records department of Colborn Aerospace. It was an entry-level position, requiring little in the way of experience, with a very low pay rate.

But for her, it was perfect, because it gave her access to the basement of the building. She and Jennifer had then poured over her father's few belongings, hoping for a clue to the location of the original turbine-design drawings. Unfortunately, they hadn't found anything else that seemed to help.

But during her company orientation, Darci learned that some of the historical records were stored in the basement of the mansion. So when she read about the search-and-rescue fundraiser, she threw together this plan.

As the guests milled around her in the main reception room, she took an absentminded sip of the champagne. So far, so good.

"Good evening." A thirty-something man in a business suit approached her.

"Good evening," Darci returned, mustering a friendly smile.

He offered his hand. "I'm Lawrence Tucker, Tucker Transportation."

"Darci." She hesitated for a split second, realizing she shouldn't use her real name. "Lake."

"Nice to meet you Darci Lake. You're a supporter of the search-and-rescue program?"

"Very much so. And you?"

His handshake was firm, his attitude forthright. He was a fairly attractive man, tall, with broad shoulders that gave him a powerful stance.

“Tucker Transportation donated twenty containers of freight shipping to anywhere in Europe.” He indicated a long row of tables with silent-auction signage above them.

“You ship to Europe?” She wanted to keep the conversation focused on him and away from her.

“We ship worldwide. Europe, Africa, Asia, Pacific.”

“You’re a large company?”

“You’ve never heard of Tucker Transportation?”

“I’ve definitely heard of you,” she quickly lied. “But I’m afraid I don’t know many details.”

“We’re the third-largest shipping company in the nation.”

“Impressive.” She took another sip of her champagne.

“There you are, Tuck.” A tall, gorgeous blonde woman twined her arm possessively around Lawrence Tucker’s.

“Hello, Petra.” He greeted her with a quick peck on the cheek.

She pouted her deep red lips. “Don’t forget, you promised to come with me on a wine-cellar tour.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

The woman’s gaze moved to Darci, where it paused, becoming speculative.

“This is Darci Lake,” said Tuck.

“Nice to meet you,” said Petra. She didn’t let go of Tuck. If anything, she pressed closer.

She was several inches taller than Darci and wearing four-inch heels. Darci guessed she was in her late twenties. Her manicure was perfect, as was her hair. And her gown likely cost more than Darci’s. Plus, she probably owned it.

“It was nice to meet you,” Darci said to Tuck, not having the slightest desire to get between Petra and her designs on the man. “Perhaps I’ll see you again later on.”

As she moved toward the back of the house, Darci left the great room behind and found herself in a wide open hall. It had twenty-foot ceilings, marble pillars and gleaming white archways. Antique-style lampposts dotted the perimeter, while an imposing wrought-iron chandelier hung in the center of the room. The decor focused on an equestrian theme, with a big bronze statue of a stallion on a large rough-hewn wood table. Rich oil paintings of rural stables and the countryside hung on the walls, and several red velvet-and-walnut armchairs bordered the room.

After an initial scan of the area, Darci found her attention drawn to a small open doorway. It led to a staircase, tucked in a corner behind a pillar and partially screened by one of the lampposts.

She wandered toward it, pretending to be fascinated by a grandfather clock against the wall. Feeling like a spy, she glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention to her movements.

The crowds were sparser here than out front in the great room. But there were enough people that she blended.

She eased her way behind the lamp.

Then she moved to the pillar.

With another quick check to make sure no one was watching, she scooted to the shadowed staircase and started down.

The stairwell was dim, and she gripped the rail. After what seemed like a long distance, she came out at a narrow white-walled hallway with a blue-and-silver-tiled floor and fluorescent lights along the ceiling.

Her heart began pounding harder as she chose between left and right. Right would take her to the back of the house while left would take her toward the front. It was a toss-up, but it seemed to her that decades-old business records would more likely be at the rear of the house.

She turned right and started along the hall.

She came to a closed door and tried the knob. It was locked. She jiggled it, thinking it was old and it might give way.

“Can I help you with something?” came a deep, accusatory voice.

She quickly twisted around, and her heart sank with a thud.

His face was shadowed, but she instantly recognized him.

She swallowed. “Mr. Colborn.”

He took a step forward, his piercing blue eyes pinning her in place. “Did you take a wrong turn?”

Her mind scrambled for a plausible explanation. “I, uh...I heard you were giving a wine-cellar tour.”

His eyes narrowed. “You did, did you?”

“Petra mentioned it. Petra and Tuck. I was talking to them earlier, and—”

“You know Tuck?”

Darci nodded. She’d known Tuck for all of five minutes. But she wasn’t about to get stuck on that detail.

Shane Colborn seemed to relax a bit. “I haven’t seen him yet tonight.”

“Petra found him. And, well, she didn’t seem to want to share.”

Shane cracked a smile. “She doesn’t. She’s had her sights set on him since we were teenagers.”

He moved closer still, offering his hand. “I’m Shane Colborn, the host of the party. Well, me and my cousin Madeline are the hosts.”

Darci immediately accepted the handshake. “I know who you are. I’m Darci Lake. You have a remarkable home.”

“Remarkable *appealing*, or remarkable *ostentatious*?”

“A little of both,” she answered before she thought it through. She realized her words had sounded like a criticism. “I mean, it’s wonderful, of course. It’s just that I can’t imagine—”

“Living here?”

“It is intimidating,” she answered honestly.

His furrowed brow told her she was blowing the entire conversation.

Insulting his home was the last thing she wanted to do. “I didn’t mean it the way it came out.” She gave her head a brief shake. “Can I please start over?”

“Go for it.”

She braced herself. “It’s a phenomenal home. And I’m sure you love it here. But it’s more opulent than I’m used to, so it’s hard to imagine living in it.”

“That wasn’t a bad recovery.”

“Thank you.”

“Personally, I also find it intimidating. And I grew up here.”

“So, you were just messing with me?”

“I was,” he said.

“That wasn’t a very nice thing to do.”

“I found you skulking around my basement, trying to break into a locked room. I don’t think it’s my behavior that deserves criticism.”

She could have kicked herself for bringing the conversation back to what she was doing down here. But to her surprise, he offered his arm.

“Would you still like to see the wine cellar?”

“I would,” she quickly answered.

“The official tour is scheduled for later on, and I have some terrific wines lined up. But we can get a head start.”

She slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. He was steady and sure. Her thumb brushed his biceps and found it defined and hard as iron.

“Do you prefer Old World wines or New World wines?” he asked as they came toward the front of the mansion.

“New World,” she answered, though it was just a stab in the dark. She knew nothing about wines but the color and the price.

“So, not a snob?”

“Not a snob,” she agreed easily.

“People seem all excited about malbecs. But give me a solid cabernet sauvignon any day of the week. What about you? Cab sauv? Or maybe pinot noir?”

“Cabernet sauvignon,” she told him, to be agreeable.

“You’re lying.”

How could he tell? “I’m not.”

“Then you’re being polite.”

“That would be a change of pace.”

He gave a low chuckle. It was a very appealing sound.

She caught herself glancing at his profile.

He was an astonishingly handsome man. She’d already known that from his many pictures in the media. But the pictures hadn’t done him justice. Some tabloids called him Chicago’s most eligible bachelor, and she wasn’t about to argue the point.

What woman wouldn’t fantasize about being held in his strong arms and kissing those full lips? Add to that his wealth and his standing in the business community, and she could understand why the elite ladies of Chicago were taking turns as his date.

They passed another closed door, and she remembered why she was here. She needed to stay focused.

“What’s in there?” she asked of the closed door.

He gave her a puzzled look. “In where?”

She backed off, realizing she could easily arouse his suspicions again. “Besides the wine cellar, what do people keep in a great big basement like this?”

He gave a glance around the hallway. “Good question. The only place I ever go is the wine cellar, being a playboy bachelor.”

“Now who’s lying?”

His father might have been dishonorable, but a man didn’t run a billion-dollar company by being nothing but a playboy. She didn’t buy for a minute that he’d never looked through his own basement.

“Some antique furniture,” he said. “Boxes of things from my parents, probably some art and some silverware. There are no bodies, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It wasn’t. But now that you mention it...” She made a show of gazing worriedly over her shoulder.

“We are all alone down here.” He finished her thought in a theatrical voice.

“Are you trustworthy, Mr. Colborn?”

“Not even a little bit. Here we are.”

He stopped in front of a wide oak door with a thick, twisted wrought-iron handle and long black hinges, strapping the aged planks together. Stonework bracketed the door on both sides, giving the entry an unfortunate dungeon look.

He extracted a long key and inserted it into a deadbolt lock.

For a horrible second, she wondered if he somehow knew who she was and if she ought to be afraid of him.

“An estate this size has a lot of staff,” he said as he turned the key. “Some of them are transient. And my father collected some ridiculously valuable wines.”

The door swung open with a groan.

Darci peered inside the dark room. “So, this isn’t the place where you lock up the innocent young women caught trespassing.”

Shane pointed with his thumb. “That room is farther down the hall.”

“Good to know.”

He flicked a light switch, and a massive room came into view. Stone walls stretched back farther than she could see. A huge rectangular wooden table sat in the center of the room, with at least twenty chairs surrounding it. The ceiling was beamed with heavy timbers, supported by thick pillars. Gleaming cedar racks and shelves stretched along each wall, with more rows protruding behind the table.

The room was cold, the scent of cedar hanging in the still air. Most bottles were on their sides in the racks. But some were out on display, while numerous stemmed glasses of varying shapes and sizes hung inverted above the table.

“This is incredible,” she whispered, taking a step into the room and turning around to take it all in.

“Incredible *charming* or incredible *intimidating*?” he asked.

“Awe inspiring.”

Everyone who visited the cellar must have the same reaction.

She moved inside, gazing in amazement. “It makes me want to learn more about wine.”

“What would you like to learn?”

She turned to face him. “What’s good?”

He drew back in obvious surprise. “Seriously?”

“For starters.”

“I was expecting a much more specific question.”

“Okay. What *tastes* good?”

“In a New World cabernet sauvignon?”

“You were right,” she said. “I was playing along back there. I don’t know anything about wine.”

She realized she’d have to continue sleuthing as soon as possible. But, for now, it seemed best to see this particular charade through to the end.

There was a twinkle in his blue eyes. “Okay.” He pulled out one of the chairs. “Then have a seat.”

She did as he asked, and he leaned down as he pushed in the chair.

“We’ll stick with New World,” he said, his voice close to her ear.

She found herself inhaling his fresh scent.

“No point in making you a snob if you’re not one already. Pinot noir to start. Then a merlot, cabernet sauvignon and shiraz.”

“Four bottles of wine?” Was he joking? “I’ll get blasted.”

He rose. “We’re not going to polish off the bottles.”

Of course they weren’t. She’d sounded ridiculously unsophisticated. She tried to backtrack. “I only meant tastings usually work better with more people.”

“They do,” he said. “Want me to go find some?”

She didn’t. And that was worrisome. She shouldn’t want to stay here alone with Shane. But she did.

His hand gently brushed her shoulder, and the tone of his voice turned intimate. “Me, neither.”

Uh-oh.

Before she could formulate a reply, he was gone, moving along the wine racks, perusing the bottles.

She angled her body and watched him from the chair, noting his concentration and the intelligence in his expression as he scrutinized the labels. She’d read he was six feet two. He was

obviously in excellent shape. He carried the designer suit with ease across his square shoulders. She could imagine his stomach was washboard hard. She'd already had a chance to feel his biceps.

She knew she couldn't afford to notice, because she couldn't afford any kind of a distraction. But there was no getting around it, Shane Colborn was one sexy package of a man. And it seemed she was as susceptible as the next Chicago woman to his looks and his charm.

* * *

Shane realized he was shamefully neglecting his other guests. It was coming up on ten o'clock, and the silent auction was about to close. He knew he should go upstairs and help his cousin Maddie announce the winners, but he wanted to see how Darci felt about the shiraz, the last of their four tastings.

Every time he hosted this fundraiser, he met new people. But few of them fascinated him the way Darci Lake did. She was down-to-earth, unaffected, and he liked her ability to laugh at herself.

She swirled the wine in her oversize glass, checking the color and viscosity as he'd told her. Then she leaned down and inhaled.

"Sharper," she said with a wrinkle of her pert nose.

She was distractingly beautiful, with thick, shoulder-length auburn hair. He guessed she was about five feet six. She was slender, with wonderfully rounded breasts, long legs and delicate hands. Her lips were full, her lashes long and her wide eyes were a startling shade of crystalline green. He could barely keep himself from staring at them.

She took a sip.

Then she nodded decisively. "Sharper. I prefer the cab sauv. Definitely."

"Welcome to the dark side."

Worry flashed through her expression. "Is there something wrong with liking cabernet sauvignon? Am I a bohemian?"

"You have excellent taste in wine."

"Are you just saying that?"

"You like what I like." He replaced her shiraz with a fresh glass of the cab sauv.

She glanced around the tabletop. "We've made a mess."

"It's not so bad."

"You were going to bring people down here for the tasting."

"The staff will clear things up in time."

He checked his watch, knowing he was cutting it pretty tight. For a moment, he considered canceling the tasting, coming up with an excuse to keep everyone else upstairs while he stayed here with Darci.

He gave a silent thank-you to Justin for talking him out of bringing a date tonight. If he played his cards right, perhaps his perfect streak of getting lucky at the search-and-rescue fundraiser would continue. There were hours to go before it ended, and the DJ was about to get things rolling on the dance floor.

Making the decision, he lifted his own wineglass and rose to his feet. "Let's take this with us."

"Sure." She followed his lead. "Where are we going?"

"The dancing's about to start. You want to dance?"

The question seemed to throw her. "With you?"

"Sure, with me. Why not?"

She seemed to scramble. "Uh, you have so many other guests. And you haven't hosted the real wine tasting yet."

He leaned across the table to take her hand. "My cousin Maddie will do the other wine tasting. I've had enough for now."

He kept hold of her hand as they cleared the table and moved through the wine cellar, to the door and out into the hallway.

“Are you going to lock it?” she asked.

“No need. The sommelier will be down in a few minutes.”

“You have a sommelier?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

Her steps faltered, and he realized the joke made him sound like a pretentious jerk.

“I’m sorry,” he said, stopping them both.

She tipped up her chin to look at him. “Nothing to be sorry about.”

“I’m not a spoiled brat. The mansion is purposely equipped for this kind of entertaining. But it’s not my regular life.”

But a remoteness had entered her eyes. “Your family has a lot of money. That’s just the way it is.”

“I don’t lord it over people, Darci.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“You’re angry.”

She looked away. “I’m really not.”

But something had changed. He could tell.

“Will you dance with me?” he asked.

She compressed her lips.

“Please dance with me.”

Voices traveled down the hall. Shane recognized the accent. The sommelier and his staff were on their way.

She blinked, and whatever had altered her expression was gone. “Okay,” she said. “One dance.”

He impulsively put an arm around her, his fingertips brushing her shoulder as they resumed walking.

The sommelier, Julien Duval, appeared in the hallway. “Mr. Colborn, sir.”

“There’s some cleanup needed in the cellar,” he told Julien.

“Right away, sir. You’ll be joining us?”

“Not this time. Can you find Madeline and ask her to stand in?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Julien.”

Shane followed Darci up the staircase. Her sparkling gold silk dress dipped to a low vee at the back, giving him a marvelous view. It outlined her trim figure and clung enticingly to her backside. He was sorry when they got to the top of the stairs.

He touched his hand to the small of her back, guiding her through the hall to the great room, where the music was already playing. People greeted him constantly, and he gave them each a casual hello but kept steadily moving. The music enveloped the two of them as they passed through the archway.

He ditched their wineglasses and led her onto the dance floor. There, he turned her into his arms.

The silk of her dress was supple and warm. Her hand was small in his. And their thighs brushed enticingly with the rhythm of the music.

They’d barely begun, and the song ended.

“That doesn’t count,” he rumbled in her ear.

“Are you making up the rules?” There was a smile in her voice.

He drew back to gaze at her. “My house, my rules.”

Happily, the next song was also a waltz. If he’d known he was going to meet Darci tonight, he’d have vetted the DJ’s entire playlist.

“You’re an autocrat?” she asked.

“Rarely.”

She settled back into his arms, smoothly following his lead. “At Colborn Aerospace. Are you in charge of everything?”

“Technically, yes.”

“Are you a tyrannical boss?”

He couldn’t help but smile at that. “I’d say no. But probably every tyrannical boss in the world would tell you no, so you’ll have to ask my staff.”

Her glance darted around the dance floor. “Are any of them here?”

“A few of the senior managers. You want me to introduce you?”

“No.” Her answer was quick and decisive.

“You don’t want to ask them about me?”

“I don’t care that much.”

“Okay.”

“I’m making up my own mind.”

He wanted that, he realized. He really wanted this woman to have a chance to make up her own mind about him. He found himself gathering her closer.

She resisted at first, going stiff in his arms.

But he persisted, and she eventually relaxed again. Her body softened against his, her curves molding to his angles. He drew their joined hands in close to their bodies, shifting his other palm higher, to the bare skin of her back. Their movements synced, and he couldn’t seem to keep his mind from wandering to a happy conclusion.

He wanted Darci Lake, wanted her very badly. He brought his cheek to her hair, inhaling a subtle scent of citrus. Her breasts had come up against his chest. Their thighs were touching, shifting together with every beat.

He gave in to temptation and kissed her hairline, whispering close to her ear. “I want you to stay tonight.”

She drew back in a shot, her striking green eyes blinking. She looked truly horrified, and he could have kicked himself.

Three

Shane’s proposition was a dose of reality.

Darci realized she had truly lost her mind. Her common sense had fled while she was plastered shamelessly against him, swaying to the music. No wonder he thought she was coming on to him.

His expression faltered. “I’m sorry. That didn’t come out right.”

But she was pretty sure it had come out exactly the way he’d meant it. And she was pretty sure she was the one to blame for leading him on.

“I meant for the rest of the party,” he said. “I don’t want you to leave before the end of the party.”

She took a half step back, telling herself she was here to spy on Shane Colborn, not to hook up with him. Even though hooking up with him seemed like a perfectly reasonable idea.

Okay, that had to be the wine talking.

He closed the space between them. “Please don’t stop dancing.”

She had to own up to her part in this. “I didn’t mean to give you the wrong idea.”

He took her hand. “You didn’t.”

“We’ve only just met. I’m not... That is...”

He eased her into his arms, and she couldn’t bring herself to fight him.

“My bad,” he murmured, taking up the rhythm of the song.

She told herself to end the encounter and politely leave. She needed to regroup.

During a few bars of the music, she gathered her thoughts and then forced herself to speak. “Thank you for the tour of the wine cellar. I’m grateful that you took the time.”

There was a smile in his voice, and it broke the tension. “But not that grateful?”

His unexpected joke was disarming.

"I'm never *that* grateful," she said.

"I'm very glad to hear it."

"I'm not buying that you're glad."

He chuckled. "Let's say I'm glad you've never been that grateful with any other guy."

"You have an opinion on my personal life?"

"I do."

"You do recall we met only two hours ago?"

He was silent for a moment, guiding them around the other couples on the crowded dance floor.

"It seems like longer."

"Are you bored?"

"Not even a little bit." He drew back to gaze at her. "But I'm feeling oddly proprietary."

She knew she had to change the direction of the conversation, but her curiosity won out over good sense. "In what way?"

He glanced around the big room. "I don't want anyone else to dance with you."

"I doubt they will." She didn't know anyone else here.

"I'm certain they will. That is, if I let you go." He gathered her a little closer. "So, I'm not going to let you go."

That truly shouldn't sound like such a good idea.

"I don't think that's practical," she said. "You're the host."

He gave a shrug. "My cousin is helping with hosting duties."

"Isn't she busy in the wine cellar?"

"We have a caterer and fantastic staff."

"So, you plan to ignore everyone else and dance with me all night long?" As soon as the words were out, she knew she should have said evening instead of night.

His blue eyes glowed, and his voice went gravelly. "I'll do anything you want all night long."

She gave him a jab in the ribs with her elbow. "You know what I meant."

"Doesn't mean I can't tease you."

"Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

The song changed, but she pretended not to notice. "So friendly and familiar with people you've just met?"

"Are you?"

The question took her aback. He made a good point. She was just as guilty as he was.

"I'm not," she said. "Never. That's why I assumed it had to be you."

"I'm really quite aloof."

"Sure you are."

"Ask anybody."

"I will."

"Ask Tuck."

"I am going to ask Tuck."

It was a lie. She didn't expect to ever see Tuck again.

Shane went silent for so long that she began to worry.

But then he spoke. "You never dated Tuck, did you?"

Her worry fled, and she sputtered out a laugh of surprise. "I've definitely never dated Tuck."

She realized now would be the time to confess that she didn't even know Tuck.

"Because that would be awkward," said Shane. "Tuck and I are very good friends."

Darci didn't know how to react to the statement.

"And you can't," Shane continued. "You know, with your best friend's ex. I mean, it's not a 100 percent rule, but it's kind of ironclad."

“Two hours,” Darci felt compelled to point out. “Do I need to remind you again that we’ve only just met? We’re not dating.”

“We should be dating.”

“You’re out of your mind.” She could assume only that this was some kind of well-practiced, pickup strategy.

He was pretty good at it, but she wasn’t going to let herself take him seriously.

“What are you doing on Friday?” he asked.

“I’m working.”

“You know I meant Friday night.”

“I’m working then, too. I have my own business, and it’s very busy right now.”

She also had a secret job at his company, a mystery to solve and a huge vendetta against his family. He might be handsome and charming, but going on a date with Shane was out of the question.

“Give yourself some time off,” he said.

“I have clients and deadlines.” There was no way in the world he was talking her into a date.

“We could do dinner or take in a play. Or both. You like comedy? *The Twist* is getting rave reviews, and there’s a great little seafood place about a mile from the theatre. Very posh, very exclusive.”

She tipped her head back. “You do understand that I’m saying no?”

“You do understand that I’m not giving up?”

“I won’t go on a date with you, Shane.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.” Then she mentally kicked herself. A boyfriend would have been the perfect excuse not to see Shane again.

“Something a little more active?” he asked. “The park? The jazz festival? Or, wait, a harbor cruise?”

“Shane, stop.”

“Or we could have a date right here,” he carried on without stopping for a breath. “The gardens are gorgeous on a summer night. We could dine out on the deck, pick ourselves a fine bottle of wine from the cellar, now that you know what you like.”

As he spoke, Darci’s brain locked on to an idea. If she came back to the Colborn mansion, especially if they went down to the wine cellar, she might have another chance to snoop around. Getting to know Shane on any level was a big risk. But she’d never get back into the mansion without getting to know him at least a bit better.

A male voice interrupted them. “Why are you hogging Darci?”

Shane stiffened against her. “Hello, Tuck.”

Darci twisted her head to see Tuck, shocked that he’d remembered her.

“I’m cutting in,” said Tuck.

“No, you’re not.”

“Of course I am.”

Shane looked to Darci, eyes narrowing. “I thought you said you’d never dated him.”

“I haven’t,” she managed in a strangled voice, feeling the walls close in around her. Something bad was about to happen.

“Quit messing around,” said Tuck. “Petra’s hot on my trail. I need a dance partner.”

“Find another one.”

“What is your *problem*?” asked Tuck.

“If you were interested in Darci, you should have said so before now.”

Darci jumped in. “Listen, I—”

“Before now?” asked Tuck in clear astonishment. “When, before now?”

“I don’t know,” Shane drawled. “In the months, maybe the years since you met her.”

If the floor would only open up and swallow her, maybe she could get herself out of this.

“Shane?” came a new female voice.

Shane turned his head.

“Looks like Maddie needs you,” said Tuck.

Then he deftly tugged Darci from Shane’s arms and twirled her away.

She scrambled to get her feet sorted out beneath her, regretful to leave Shane and also realizing she’d just blown her opportunity to return to the mansion. She should have accepted his invitation as soon as he’d offered it.

“Sorry about that,” said Tuck, as they settled a little awkwardly into dancing. “But Petra’s one determined woman.”

“You seem like a very determined man.”

Tuck laughed. “So was Shane. By the way, why did he think I might be dating you?”

Darci’s face heated with embarrassment. “That was my fault. I’d mentioned you earlier, and he misunderstood. I should have corrected his assumption.”

“Nah. It’ll be more fun this way. I’d rather mess with his head. He spent most of our teenage years messing with mine.”

“He did?” She was intrigued.

“We were both rich young men with fast cars, who could tip our way into the best nightclubs, but he was better looking.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your looks.”

Tuck had heavier features than Shane, a slightly crooked smile and a scar on his chin. But he was still a handsome man.

He chuckled. “I wasn’t fishing. Every time I found a new girl, Shane would flirt with her.”

“That’s not nice.”

“He grew out of it. And, I figured out he was testing them, checking to see if they truly liked me or if they’d go with any rich guy.”

“Did they all pick Shane?” She felt a rush of sympathy for Tuck.

“All except Roberta Wilson back in high school. She didn’t give him a second look.”

“And?” Darci prompted.

“And I dated her for six months in senior year.” He shrugged. “And then it ended. She went off to a different college. Our whole carefree lifestyle ended abruptly when Shane lost his parents.”

Darci was reminded that Shane hadn’t always had things easy.

They danced in silence.

“It sounds like Shane is protective,” said Darci, wondering how far he’d go to defend his father’s honor.

“And loyal,” said Tuck, then he glanced over her shoulder in Shane’s direction. “So tell me about Darci Lake. I have a feeling I’ll get quizzed after you leave.”

Darci wasn’t crazy about perpetuating a ruse with Tuck, since he was an innocent bystander. Then again, what were a few more lies? She was already in deep, and it looked as if it was going to get much deeper before it was all over.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

“Where are you from? What do you do?”

“I grew up in Chicago, went to Columbia.”

“Nice.”

“I have a graphic-art business. We mostly design websites.”

“That’s a growth industry,” said Tuck.

“So far, business is good.” In fact, it was so good, between working at Colborn Aerospace during the day and trying to keep up with her website contracts at night, she was barely getting any sleep.

“I might want to hire you.”

"I've got a waiting list right now." She could fit in another client, but she was staying well away from Shane's friends. "Tell me something more about you."

"Good idea. Shane will probably quiz you, too."

Darci doubted it. Once again, she mentally berated herself for having let the opportunity to come back to the mansion slip past.

"I'm the second son of Jamison Tucker, who was the only child of Randal Tucker, founder of Tucker Transportation. I'm a vice president. My older brother Dixon is the president-in-waiting."

"Does that bother you?" Darci couldn't help but ask.

"That he'll be top dog and not me? Nah. More time for me to goof off."

"Because being second in command is such an easy job?"

"It is if you—"

"You're done." Shane reappeared, scowling at Tuck.

"Looks like I'm done," Tuck agreed, letting her go. "Thank you for the dance, Darci."

"Thank you," she replied, surprised that Shane had come back to her.

He pulled her rather forcefully into his arms.

She immediately felt the difference in his posture. He was stiff, his movements jerky.

"Was that fun?" he asked her in a tight voice.

"It was fine." She struggled to find the rhythm.

"You like Tuck?"

"Tuck's perfectly nice."

"Nice?"

"Nice." The circumstances suddenly struck her as ridiculous, and she fought a grin. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Acting like I betrayed you by dancing with Tuck. You can't lay claim to every woman you've known for two hours."

"Three hours."

"I stand corrected."

He went silent, but his movements gradually smoothed out and his shoulders seemed to relax. As the minutes ticked by, he drew her nearer, once again bringing his cheek to rest against her hair.

"Friday night?" he asked.

She saw no benefit in being coy. "On your deck? With another fine bottle of wine?"

"Absolutely."

"Then okay. It's a date."

His tone was a deep, sexy rumble. "It's a date."

She swallowed. Her stomach flip-flopped with trepidation, but she knew she had to see this through.

* * *

"Run that past me one more time," said Jennifer.

"It's the best, probably the only way to get back into his house," said Darci from the third rung of the stepladder, as she tapped a picture hook into the wall. She had no intention of repeating the details of her dance with Shane.

"So, you're dating Shane Colborn."

"I'm *pretending* to date him."

"But, he won't know you're pretending."

The hook seemed solid, so Darci went backward down the ladder. "That would be the entire point of pretending. You think the orchids on this wall or the sky scape?"

"The orchids. But you're attracted to him?"

Darci moved to the breakfast bar to retrieve a measuring tape and level. The five connected, abstract orchid paintings needed to be hung with precision.

“He’s easy to be attracted to,” she said.

Jennifer began tearing the brown packing paper off the largest of the orchid paintings. “And you don’t think that’s dangerous?”

“I’m saying I think I can pull it off without anything personal getting in the way.”

He’d likely kiss her. In fact, she was positive he’d kiss her. And that was fine. What was a kiss? She could handle a kiss.

“And if you can’t?” Jennifer asked.

Darci took a measure and positioned the level on the wall.

“If you’ve got a better idea,” she said, “I’m all ears.”

“You’ve checked the entire Colborn records center?”

“I’m still working through the stacks. I haven’t found anything that old in the computer system. But there are a lot of files on paper only. It’s going to take some time.”

“Maybe you should finish with the office first. It seems a lot safer.”

Darci made a mark with her pencil and reeled in the tape measure. “I’m doing it concurrently. I can’t spend the rest of my life at this.”

She needed to find her father’s schematic drawings, restore his reputation as an engineer, get justice for him and quit her job at Colborn.

“I suppose.” Jennifer sounded dubious.

“What exactly are you worried about?”

“That you’ll get caught, of course.”

Darci climbed back up the ladder, hammer and hook in hand. She had to admit, getting caught was a definite risk. She wasn’t an experienced spy or a cat burglar or a con artist. This playacting and clandestine snooping was definitely out of her comfort zone.

“I don’t think it’s a really serious crime.” She hammered as she spoke. “It’s not like I’m taking anything valuable. I’ll even give it all back, once I’ve proved my point.”

Jennifer spoke over the sound of tearing paper. “If you’re right, those drawings could net you millions and millions of dollars.”

Darci countered, “It’s not about the money.”

“Maybe not to you. But it’s definitely going to be about the money to Shane Colborn. All the money he stands to lose. What do you think a man like that would do to protect millions of dollars?”

Darci gave a laugh and went back to work. “You think he’ll lock me in the tower or hire a hit man?”

“Hit men have been hired over a lot less.”

“You’ve been watching too many crime dramas. Quit worrying. Now, tell me you didn’t call Ashton today.”

“I didn’t call Ashton today.” But there was a thread of guilt in Jennifer’s tone.

This time Darci turned more slowly, gazing incredulously at Jennifer, who was balancing a painting against her legs. “You’re lying.”

“I didn’t talk to him. I swear.”

“But you tried,” Darci guessed. “You tried, but you didn’t get through?”

Jennifer glanced guiltily down. “I got his voice mail.”

Darci groaned. “Please tell me you didn’t leave a message.”

“I didn’t leave a message.” Again, there was a distinct thread of guilt in Jennifer’s tone.

“But?”

“I might have breathed for about five seconds. But I made the right choice. I hung up. I didn’t say anything.”

“He’ll see your number.”

“It’s blocked. I blocked it.”

“So that you could call Ashton?”

Jennifer tapped her fingertips along the top edge of the painting. “Maybe.”

“We need to get you into a twelve-step program.”

“Big talk from a woman embarking on a life of crime.”

“My life of crime will have a net positive outcome. You calling Ashton is only going to mess up your life.”

“I wish I could say you were wrong.” Jennifer lifted the painting, then stepped forward to hand it up to Darci. “It’s not that I can’t see the danger. But he’s like chocolate-ribbon cookie dough. You know you’ll regret it in the end, but sometimes a girl just has to go for it.”

“You’re making me hungry.”

Jennifer grinned while Darci turned to position the center painting.

“How’s that?” Darci asked.

Jennifer took a few steps back. “Perfect.”

She retrieved the next largest painting and passed it to Darci.

Darci married the hook to the hanger. Then she stepped down to see how they looked.

“The spacing looks right to me,” said Jennifer.

There was about four inches of cream-colored wall between the two connected oils.

“You’ve given me a craving for ice cream,” said Darci.

“We don’t have any ice cream. But I do have a box of almond-caramel crunch.”

“Bring it on.”

While Jennifer went for the chocolates, Darci moved the ladder and measured for the next picture hook.

“Tell me about your upcoming date,” Jennifer called from the kitchen.

“Dinner and wine on his deck. My plan so far is to get him to the wine cellar, pretend I need the restroom, then snoop my way through the basement.”

“And if he comes after you?”

“I’ll pretend I’m lost.”

“It might work,” Jennifer conceded.

On her return, she picked up the remote control and put on the TV in the living area. A news reporter’s voice filled the background.

“He might get suspicious.” Darci hung picture number three, then stepped back, liking how it looked. “But he’s never going to guess the truth.”

“Maybe he’ll think you’re a reporter writing an expose on him,” said Jennifer.

“You think?” That hadn’t occurred to Darci.

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look,” said Jennifer.

Darci turned.

Jennifer pointed to the television. “Bianca Covington just published a book.”

“Who’s Bianca Covington?”

“Somebody gorgeous and famous, I guess.”

Darci moved for a better view. A young blonde woman sat across the table from Berkley Nash, an infamous, local reporter. The camera zoomed in on a book with a fuchsia cover, titled *Shane Colborn—Behind the Mask*.

“The perils of being rich,” said Jennifer.

“I wonder if it’s flattering,” said Darci while a headshot of Shane came up on the screen. Her chest contracted at the sight. He was cover-model gorgeous.

Suddenly, she couldn't combat her rising trepidation. Why had he been so insistent about arranging a date with her when he could have any woman in the city? Sure, she'd been wearing a four-thousand-dollar dress, and her hair and makeup had been stellar. But she was no Bianca Covington.

She had to allow for the possibility that Shane knew who she was and was stringing her along.

"There are some scandalous accusations between these pages," said Berkley.

Bianca gave a throaty laugh. "I think readers will be shocked to discover the dark side of Shane Colborn."

Jennifer raised her brows at Darci. "Dark side?"

"I'm sure she's exaggerating for ratings."

"You're going to his mansion."

"It'll be fine."

"Alone."

"He's not Count Dracula." Darci wasn't fearful at all. Well, except for the worry he might know her real identity.

"But you're going to cross him."

"I am."

"And he's got a dark side."

"Well, I have a dark side, too. I'm spying on the man."

"Ruthless," Bianca stated with conviction, her darkly outlined eyes wide. "And completely narcissistic. The silver spoon is still lodged in that man's mouth."

"That doesn't sound too bad," said Darci.

Except for the ruthless part, she supposed.

Maybe she should pick up a copy of Bianca's book before Friday, just so she'd know what she was up against.

* * *

At a corner table in Daelan's Bar and Grill, Shane could feel the critical glances of the other patrons flick from the television above the bar to him and then back again.

"It's about what we expected," said Justin as the news program moved on from Bianca. "And at least we're still in the running for the Gobrecht Airlines contract."

"She's pretty hot," said Tuck, taking a drink from the mug of lager in his hand.

Shane had a deluxe burger and fries on a plate in front of him. A minute ago, he'd been starving. But now he'd lost his appetite.

"This is going to go on for a while," he stated to no one in particular.

"She does seem to enjoy the limelight," said Justin.

"Was she worth it?" asked Tuck.

"Not even close," said Shane.

Bianca had been bubbly, energetic and fun. Agreeable to anything Shane suggested, he realized now that she'd been humoring him. She probably wasn't even a Bulls fan.

"There has to be a way to fight back," he said.

Over the past few days, he'd concluded that Justin was right. It didn't much matter what she said about their sex life. But her accusations of corporate misconduct stood to hurt Colborn Aerospace.

"Fuel to the fire," said Justin.

"Libel? Slander?" asked Shane.

"You have to be ready to prove it."

Tuck stepped in. "I'd be willing to go undercover. Date her. Sleep with her. Write some juicy lies about her."

"She knows we're friends," said Shane. Not that he'd ever agree. He wanted to stop her, not get revenge.

"Worth a try," said Tuck.

“You can’t sleep with your friend’s ex,” said Justin.

“I *shouldn’t* sleep with my friend’s ex,” said Tuck. “But once she betrays him, all bets are off. Shane doesn’t care if I sleep with her. Do you, Shane?”

“The woman can sleep with an entire offensive line for all I care.”

“See?” said Tuck.

“You have no morals,” said Justin.

“Bianca has no morals,” said Shane.

Tuck raised his glass. “I think we can all agree on that.”

The men clicked mugs, and each took a swig of beer.

“So, what happened with Darci?” asked Tuck.

“You stay away from Darci,” Shane warned, deciding to eat some of the fries, after all. No point in starving for the sake of his deceitful, immoral ex.

“Who’s Darci?” asked Justin.

“The anti-Bianca,” said Shane.

“She saves orphans and feeds the hungry?”

“It was all I could do to get her to say yes to a date with me.”

“*Date?*” Justin’s attention immediately perked up. “What date?”

“She could be purposely playing hard to get,” said Tuck.

“Not my take,” Shane said to Tuck, ignoring Justin. “But you know her. What’s she like?”

“Grew up in Chicago,” said Tuck. “She went to Colombia. From what I can tell, she’s a regular gal. Has her own business, designing websites.”

“You need to stay stag for a while,” said Justin.

“Relax. It’s dinner at the mansion. No crowds, no cameras, just the two of us.”

Something warm settled inside Shane when he thought about Friday’s date. Darci seemed so fresh and genuine. That she’d chosen the privacy of his mansion over a play and a trendy restaurant was a good sign. She reminded him that not all women fixated on his wealth and status. Sometimes, they simply wanted to get to know him.

Four

“You read the book?” Shane asked as he topped up Darci’s wineglass and then refilled his own.

“Of course I read the book,” she answered.

Finally, they’d emptied the bottle of wine that had been open and on the table when they started dinner. Maybe now she had a chance at getting to the wine cellar.

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