

2 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE



Desire

BILLIONAIRE'S
CONTRACT ENGAGEMENT

Maya Banks

MONEY MAN'S
FIANCÉE NEGOTIATION

Michelle Celmer

Michelle Celmer
Maya Banks
Billionaire's Contract
Engagement / Money
Man's Fiancée Negotiation
Серия «Mills & Boon Desire»

Аннотация

Billionaire's Contract Engagement Billionaire businessman Evan Reese had wanted her for six months. Now Celia would accompany him to beautiful Catalina for a family wedding. There he would wine, dine and seduce the stunning ad executive...for he knew she desired him. Yet how would she react when Evan told her she'd be playing the role of his fake fiancée? Money Man's Fiancée Negotiation Finally, Ash Williams had found his runaway mistress. Melody Trent couldn't even remember him, but Ash was determined to discover the truth. Had he fathered her child? And the only way to bring her to his home was to claim her as his fiancée – even if she had no memory of him whatsoever! **KINGS OF THE BOARDROOM** They need the right women to melt their steel-hard hearts!

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Advertising Media Volume 185

FEATURESPOTLIGHT

This Week in Advertising ...

The Ad Woman: Celia Taylor

Her New Campaign:

Extra-strength adhesive. Because once you catch the guy ... you need to hold on to him!

We always suspected that Maddox Communications account executive Celia Taylor could play with the big boys. But is she actually playing with one in her private life? She was, after all, last seen heading off to Catalina Island on Evan Reese's private jet.

It's a well-known fact that Maddox needs to seal Reese's company as their new account. But to what lengths is Celia actually willing to go? One rumour is that she's just travelling with Reese to pitch him her ideas. The other is a lot more interesting ... Before he got on that flight, the billionaire businessman was said to have bought an engagement ring. Just whose finger is it meant for?

BILLIONAIRE'S

CONTRACT

ENGAGEMENT

MAYA BANKS

AND

MONEY MAN'S

FIANCÉE
NEGOTIATION
MICHELLE CELMER



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MAYA BANKS

About the Author

MAYA BANKS has loved romance novels from a very (very) early age, and almost from the start, she dreamed of writing them, as well. In her teens she filled countless notebooks with overdramatic stories of love and passion. Today her stories are only slightly less dramatic, but no less romantic.

She lives in Texas with her husband and three children and wouldn't contemplate living anywhere other than the South. When she's not writing, she's usually hunting, fishing or playing poker. She loves to hear from readers, and she can be found online at either www.mayabanks.com or www.writemindedblog.com, or you can e-mail her at maya@mayabanks.com.

To Elizabeth Edwards —

Thank you so much for allowing me to pick your brain.

The information was invaluable and helped me to really wrap my mind around these characters.

And for Diana —

you'll be missed!

Dear Reader,

Temptation is hard to overcome, as Celia Taylor is about to find out. Even the best of intentions can't hold up against the persuasive powers of tall, wealthy, gorgeous Evan Reese. But really, what's a girl to do when it's clear the man is very hungry

and she's on the menu?

Celia has some very important lessons to learn — about just who's important in the scheme of things and what she isn't willing to give up ... for anyone. Evan? He knows what he wants. He just has to persuade a certain someone of that.

Evan and Celia have a fun but very passionate flirtation. They dance around each other — not so delicately — but that's what made this book so fun to write. It is my hope that they charm you as much as they did me and that you enjoy their journey to happily ever after.

Enjoy Evan and Celia's story!

Until next time,

Maya Banks

One

The vultures were circling.

Celia Taylor stood back, wineglass in hand, and surveyed the crowded ballroom. The fund-raiser was supposed to be more pleasure than business, but business was uppermost on the minds of her competition.

Across the room, Evan Reese stood in a large group of people. He looked relaxed, seemingly in his element, an easy smile making his extraordinarily handsome face even more gorgeous.

It should be a crime for a man to be that good-looking. Tall, rugged, he looked every inch the kind of man who'd be at home in the athletic wear his company designed and sold. There was an aura of confidence and power around him, and above all, Celia loved a man who was sure of himself.

Given the long, searching glances they'd exchanged over the last few weeks, she'd be a fool not to entertain the idea of seeing where things could lead.

If he wasn't a prospective client.

A client she wanted to land very much.

She wanted the account—her boss and the agency was counting on her—but she drew the line at sleeping with a man to get what she wanted.

Celia turned away from the sight of Evan Reese before she became too enthralled in just watching him. They'd performed

a delicate dance around each other ever since he'd fired his last advertising agency. He knew she wanted him—in the professional sense of course. Hell, he probably knew she wanted him naked and in bed too, but she wasn't going to dwell on that. Maybe later tonight when she could afford to indulge in a little fantasy.

The problem was, anytime a big company like Reese Enterprises fired an agency, it became open season. The other agencies circled like sharks. It was a dog-eat-dog world, and in reality, she should be over there, shoving herself down his throat like the rest of her competition, but she couldn't help but believe Evan Reese was secretly amused by the attention. He took a different hand. She was sure of it.

“Celia, glad you made it. Have you spoken to Reese yet?”

Celia turned to see her boss, Brock Maddox, standing a foot away. He wasn't drinking. He didn't even look particularly thrilled to be here.

Her eyebrow rose. “A tux. Why, Brock, you look positively decadent. However are you keeping the ladies at bay?”

He grunted in response, his lips curling in distaste. “Cut it out, Celia. I brought Elle along.”

Celia looked beyond his shoulder to see his pretty assistant standing a few feet away. When Elle looked her way, Celia smiled and waved.

“You look beautiful,” Celia mouthed.

Elle smiled and ducked her head self-consciously but not

before Celia saw the faint blush that colored her cheeks.

Brock gestured impatiently toward Evan. "Why are you standing over here while Evan Reese is over there?" Brock scanned the room and his expression hardened. "I should have known the old bastard would be here."

Celia followed his gaze to see Athos Koteas holding court within hearing distance of Evan. Though she wouldn't admit it to Brock, it made her extremely nervous to see their business rival hammering so relentlessly on Evan Reese. Koteas owned Golden Gate Promotions, and not only had Koteas lured away a few of Maddox's top clients in recent months, he'd also launched a PR campaign against Maddox. It was dirty pool, but it in no way surprised Celia. Koteas was ruthless, and he'd do anything to win.

"Well, yes," Celia murmured. "His ad execs are busy working Evan over."

"Any reason you aren't?"

She laid her hand on his forearm. She knew how important this account was to Brock—to everyone at Maddox Communications. "I need you to trust me, Brock. I've studied Evan Reese extensively. He knows I'm interested. He'll come to me eventually. I'm sure of it."

"Are you fifty million dollars sure, Celia? Maddox is small, and this kind of deal means our employees keep their jobs whereas if we continue to lose clients and accounts, I can't make any guarantees."

"I know I'm asking a lot," she said in a low voice. "But I can't

walk over there and pull out the seductive wiles.” She gestured toward the women standing around Evan. They weren’t making any bones as to how far they’d go to sign him. “It’s what he expects, and you of all people know I can’t do it. I can land this account on the *ideas*, Brock. I’ve spent every waking minute putting this pitch together. There’s no way he won’t go for it.”

Brock studied her for a long moment, his eyes gleaming with what looked like respect. She loved working for him. He was hard. He was demanding. And he was the only person she’d presented her side of what had happened in New York in her last advertising job.

“I never expected you to land the account on anything less than your brilliance, Celia,” Brock said softly. “I hope I never gave you any other impression.”

“I know. I appreciate your confidence more than you know. I won’t let you down. I won’t let Maddox Communications down.”

Brock ran a hand through his hair and glanced once more across the room. He looked tired. It was true he worked hard. The agency was everything to him. But in the last few months new lines had appeared around his eyes. More than anything Celia wanted to be able to hand this account to him. He had believed in her when everyone else was willing to think the worst.

She glanced up to see Evan threading his way through the throng of people. “Don’t look now, but he’s headed our way. Maybe you should take Elle and go dance or something.”

As quickly as he’d approached, Brock turned and melted back

into the crowd.

Celia sipped at her wine and practiced nonchalance as she literally felt Evan close in. It was impossible to miss him. Her body always seemed to heat up about five degrees whenever he was anywhere near.

And his smell. Even amid the hustle and bustle of the crowded room, the mix of so many feminine perfumes, she could pick out his unique scent. Rough. Masculine and mouthwateringly sexy. It made no sense to her, but she was attuned to his every nuance, and that had nothing to do with all the studying up she'd done on him and his company.

"Celia," he murmured.

She turned with a welcoming smile. "Hello, Evan. Enjoying the evening?"

"I think you know I'm not."

She raised one eyebrow and stared at him over the rim of her glass. "Do I?"

Evan snagged a flute from a passing waiter and turned his attention fully on her. It was all she could do not to gasp under his heated scrutiny. It was as if he undressed her right then and there in front of a roomful of people. Her blood simmered and pooled low in her belly. He had beautiful eyes, and they were currently devouring her, delving beneath the modest evening gown she'd chosen. He made it seem like she wore the most scanty, revealing dress imaginable. She felt nude and vulnerable under his searing gaze.

“Tell me something, Celia. Why aren’t you over with the rest of the piranhas convincing me that your ad agency will take Reese Enterprises straight to the top?”

Her lips curved upward into a smile. “Because you already are at the top?”

“You’re such a tease.”

At that her smile faded. He was right. She was flirting, and it was the last thing she wanted to do.

She glanced across the room to where the other ad execs stood staring holes through her and Evan.

“I’m not desperate, Evan. I know I’m good. I know my ideas for your ad campaign are spectacular. Does that make me arrogant? Maybe. But I don’t need to sell you on a load of malarkey. All I need is the time to show you what Maddox Communications can do for you.”

“What *you* can do for me, Celia.”

Her eyes widened in surprise at the blatant innuendo. And then he went on to correct the errant assumption she’d just made.

“If the ideas are yours and are as brilliant as you say, I’d hardly be taking on Maddox and what the agency could do for me. I’d be hiring you.”

She frowned and hated that she suddenly felt at a disadvantage. Her fingers curled a little tighter around the glass, and she prayed they wouldn’t shake and betray her unease.

He studied her curiously, having obviously picked up on her discomfort.

“It wasn’t a proposition, Celia. Believe me, you’d know the difference.”

In a daring move, he reached a finger out and traced a line down the bare skin of her arm. She was unable to call back the shiver, or the sprinkling of chill bumps that danced over her flesh.

“I only meant that if you wow me with a pitch and I sign on with Maddox, you won’t pawn me off to some junior executive. I’d expect you to oversee the campaign at every level.”

“And do you anticipate signing with Maddox Communications?” she asked huskily.

There was a gleam of amusement in his green eyes. He took a measured sip of his wine and then regarded her lazily. “If your pitch is good enough. Golden Gate has some good ideas. I’m considering them.”

Her lips tightened. “Only because you haven’t seen mine yet.”

He smiled again. “I like confidence. I don’t like false modesty. I look forward to seeing what you have in mind, Celia Taylor. I have a feeling you put every bit of that passion I see burning in your eyes into your work. Brock Maddox is a lucky man to have such a fierce employee. I wonder if he knows it.”

“Are we moving into the appointment phase?” she asked lightly. “I have to admit, I’ve enjoyed watching you surrounded by the piranhas as you call them.”

He put his glass down on a nearby table. “Dance with me and we’ll discuss appointment times.”

Her eyes narrowed.

He lifted one finely constructed eyebrow into what looked like a challenge.

“I’ve also danced with female ad executives from Golden Gate, Primrose, San Fran Media—”

She held up her hand. “Okay, okay, I get it. You’re making your selection on who’s the best dance partner.”

He threw back his head and laughed. Several people around them turned to stare, and she had to resist the strong urge to flee the room. She hated the attention that Evan seemed to have no issue with whatsoever. How nice it must be not to have to worry what people thought about you. To have your reputation intact and not have suffered the stupidity and vindictiveness of others. But then men rarely suffered in cases like hers. It was always the woman. The vilified other woman.

Knowing no graceful way to bow out of the dance, she set down her own glass and allowed Evan to lead her onto the ballroom floor.

To her relief, he held her loosely. To anyone looking on, they could find no fault or impropriety. She and Evan didn’t look like lovers, but she knew the thought was present in both their minds. She could see the desire in his eyes and knew he could probably see it in hers.

She wasn’t practiced at hiding her emotions. Maybe being the only girl in an all-male household growing up was the reason. Her family was a loud, demonstrative lot, and she’d always been

regarded as the precious daughter and sister.

It would make her life easier to be able to hide her thoughts from this man. Then she wouldn't concern herself over whether he was giving her a shot because he thought she deserved it or whether he was thinking only of the powerful sexual pull between them and how best to capitalize on it.

Wow, Celia. Lump him in with all the other jerks you've known, why don't you? Nothing like being tried and convicted based on your gender.

"Relax. You're thinking way too much," Evan murmured close to her ear.

She forced herself to do as he'd instructed and gave herself over to the beautiful music and the sheer enjoyment of dancing with a man who took her breath away.

"So how is next week? I have Friday free."

She jerked back to reality, and for a moment couldn't for the life of her figure out what he was talking about. Some professional she was.

"I was thinking we could meet informally and you could go over what you have in mind. If I'm interested we could do the whole shebang at your agency. Maybe that'll save us both a lot of time and hassle if I'm not loving your ideas."

"Sure. I can do Friday. Friday is good."

The music ended, and he held her just a bit longer than necessary, but she was so affected by the intensity of his gaze that she couldn't formulate a single objection.

“I’ll have my assistant call you with the time and location then.”

He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips. The warm brush of his mouth over the back of her hand sent a bolt of pleasure straight down her spine.

“Until Friday.”

She watched wordlessly as he strolled away. He was immediately swallowed up by a crowd of people again, but he turned and found her gaze. For a moment they simply stared at one another and then the corners of his mouth lifted into a half smile.

Oh, yes, he knew. He knew exactly what her reaction to him was. He’d have to be a complete moron not to. And he was anything but. The man was smart. He was driven. And he had a reputation for being ruthless. He was the perfect client.

She turned to walk toward the exit. She’d done what she’d come for. There was no reason to stick around and be social. If there was any gossip over her dance with Evan, she certainly didn’t want to hear it.

On the way, she passed Brock and Elle, who were standing somewhat awkwardly to the side. Brock didn’t say anything. He just lifted an inquiring brow. Of course he would have seen her dancing with Evan. Brock probably hadn’t looked at anyone but Evan all night. A shame, really, since Elle looked fabulous in her black sheath.

“Friday,” she said in a low voice. “I meet with him Friday. No

formal pitch. He wants to hear my ideas first. If he likes them, he'll arrange a time for us to hit him with both barrels."

Brock nodded, and she saw the gleam of satisfaction light his eyes.

"Good work, Celia."

Celia smiled and resumed her path to the door. She had a lot to do before next Friday.

Evan Reese loosened his tie as soon as he walked into his hotel suite. He left a trail of clothing from the door, where he threw his jacket over one of the chairs, to the bedroom where he peeled off his socks and left them on the floor.

The desk with his laptop and briefcase beckoned, but for once, the idea of work didn't appeal to him. He was too preoccupied with thoughts of Celia Taylor.

Beautiful, seductive, impossibly aloof Celia Taylor.

His body had been on heightened sense of alert ever since she walked into the ballroom, and though he'd known the moment she left, he was still tense and painfully aware of her scent, how she felt in his arms, how her skin felt under his fingers the one time he'd been bold enough to touch her.

He wanted to do a hell of a lot more than just touch. He wanted to taste her. He wanted her underneath him, making all those feminine, breathy sounds of a woman being pleased.

He wanted to slide his hand between those gorgeous legs and spread her thighs. He would spend all night making love to her. A woman such as Celia wasn't to be rushed. No, he'd get to know

every inch of her body. Find out where she liked to be touched and kissed.

His fixation with her couldn't be readily explained. It wasn't as though he lived as a monk. He had sex. He never lacked for partners. Sex was good. But he knew that sex with Celia would never be just good. It would be lush and delicious. The kind of experience a man would sell his soul for.

She was indeed a beautiful woman. Tall, but not too tall. She would fit perfectly against him, her head tucked just underneath his chin. She often wore her long red hair up in a loose style that told him she didn't pay a lot of attention to whether every strand was in place.

He wanted to take that damn clip out, toss it in the garbage and watch as her silken mass spilled down her back. Or better yet, let it spill over him while they made love.

He cursed under his breath when his body reacted to that image. Cold showers didn't do a thing for his hunger. He ought to know. He'd taken enough of them over the last few weeks.

Perhaps her most mesmerizing feature was her eyes. An unusual shade of green. At times they looked more blue but in certain lighting they were vivid green.

The more cynical side of him wondered why a woman that beautiful hadn't tried to seduce him into hiring her agency. It wasn't like it hadn't been attempted before. In fact, he'd received two such propositions tonight at the fund-raiser.

He wasn't saying he'd mind. Right now he'd use just about

any reason to get into Celia Taylor's bed. But there was a reserve about her that intrigued him. She was a cool customer, and he admired that. She wanted the account. She'd made no bones about that. But she hadn't actively pursued him.

No, she'd waited for him to come to her, and maybe that made her damn smart since he'd done just that.

The ring of his BlackBerry disturbed his fantasy and brought him sharply back to the present. He looked down in disgust at the unmistakable ridge in his trousers then reached into his pocket for his phone.

His mother. He frowned. He wasn't really in the mood for anything to do with his family, but he loved his mother dearly, and he couldn't very well ignore her.

With a resigned sigh, he punched the answer button and put the phone to his ear.

"Hello, Mom."

"Evan! I'm so glad I caught you. You're so busy these days."

He could hear the disapproval and worry in her voice.

"The business doesn't run itself," he reminded her.

She made a low sound of exasperation. "You sound so much like your father."

He winced. That wasn't exactly at the top of the list of things he wanted to hear.

"I wanted to call to make sure you hadn't forgotten about this weekend. It's important to Mitchell that you be there."

There was a note of anxiety in her voice that always seemed

to creep in when his brother was mentioned.

“You can’t think I’d actually go to their wedding,” Evan said mildly. And the only important thing to Mitchell was that Evan be there to see his triumph.

His mother made a disapproving sound. “I know it won’t be easy for you, Evan. But don’t you think you should forgive him? It’s obvious he and Bettina belong together. It would be so nice to have the whole family back together again.”

“Easy? It won’t be easy *or* difficult, Mom. I don’t care, and frankly they’re welcome to each other. I simply don’t have the time or the desire to attend.”

“Would you do it for me?” she begged. “Please. I want just one time to see my sons in the same room.”

Evan sank onto the edge of the bed and pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. If his dad had called, he would have had no problem refusing. If Mitchell had called, Evan nearly laughed at that idea. Mitchell wouldn’t be calling him for anything after Evan had told him to go to hell and take his faithless fiancée with him.

But this was his mother, whom he harbored real affection for. His mother, who was always caught in the middle of the tension that existed between him and his father and between him and Mitchell.

“All right, Mom. I’ll come. But I’ll be bringing someone with me. I hope you don’t mind.”

He could practically see her beam right through the phone.

“Why, Evan, you didn’t tell me you were seeing someone new! Of course you’re welcome to bring her. I’ll very much look forward to meeting her.”

“Can you forward all the details to my assistant so she can make arrangements?”

His mom sighed. “How did I know you wouldn’t have kept the original e-mail?”

Because he’d immediately sent it to the trash folder? Of course he wouldn’t tell her that.

“Send it to Vickie and I’ll see you on Friday. I love you,” he said after a short pause.

“I love you too, son. I’m so very glad you’re coming.”

He ended the call and stared down at his BlackBerry. Friday. Hell. Friday was when he was meeting Celia. Finally meeting Celia.

He’d planned meticulously, not wanting to seem overanxious. He’d flirted, exchanged long, seeking glances and had spent a lot of damn time in the shower. He was surprised he hadn’t come down with hypothermia.

And now he was going to have to cancel because his mother thought that he should go see the woman he was supposed to have married instead marry his younger brother.

He needed to find a date. Preferably one who would convince his mother he wasn’t secretly pining over Bettina. He wasn’t. He’d gotten over her the moment she’d dumped him for his brother when Mitchell was appointed the CEO position in their family

jewelry business.

She preferred the glitz-and-glamour facade of the jewelry world over the sweaty, athletic image of his company. It was just as well she wasn't bright enough to have done any research. If she had, she would have known that Evan's company's earnings far exceeded those of his father's jewelry business. And it had only taken him a few years to accomplish it.

His mother wouldn't believe it but Evan was grateful to his brother for being a selfish pinhead. Mitchell wanted Bettina because Evan had her. Thanks to that deep need for one-upmanship, Evan had narrowly escaped a huge mistake.

But it didn't mean he wanted to spend quality time with his controlling father and his spoiled, self-indulgent sibling. He'd agreed, however, and now he needed a date.

With a shake of his head, he began scrolling through his address book in his BlackBerry. He had narrowed his options to three women, when the solution came to him.

It was brilliant, really. He was an idiot for not having thought of it immediately. It certainly solved *all* his problems.

Finally he had a way of luring Celia to him. It would be business, of course, but if the setting happened to be intimate and she was for all practical purposes stranded with him on Catalina Island for three days ...

A satisfied smile raised the corners of his mouth. Maybe the wedding wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

Two

When Celia pulled into her father's driveway, she was relieved to see Noah's Mercedes parked beside their father's pickup. She pulled her black BMW on the other side of the truck and grinned at how the two expensive cars flanked the beat-up old piece of family history.

As she got out, she heard the roar of another engine and turned to see Dalton pull in behind her. To her utter shock, Adam climbed out of the passenger seat.

"Adam!" she exclaimed, and ran straight for him.

He grinned just before she launched herself into his arms. She hit his chest and as she'd known he would, he caught her and whirled her around. Just like he'd done when she'd been five years old and every year since.

"How come I never get greetings like that?" Dalton grumbled as he climbed from behind the wheel.

"I'm so glad to see you," she whispered fiercely.

His big arms surrounded her in a hug that nearly squeezed the breath out of her. Adam always gave the best hugs.

"It's good to see you too, Cece. I missed you. Took you long enough to come back home."

She slid down until her feet met the ground again, and she briefly looked away.

"Hey," he chided as he nudged her chin until she looked at

him again. "None of that. It's all in the past, and it's a good damn thing it is otherwise your brothers would hop the first plane to New York and beat the crap out of your former boss."

"Hey, hello, I'm here, too," Dalton said, waving a hand between them.

She held Adam's gaze for a moment longer and then smiled her thanks. Her brothers were overbearing. They were loud, protective and they certainly had their faults. Like not believing she needed to do anything more in life than look pretty and let them support her. But God love them, they were fierce in their loyalty to her, and she adored them for it.

Finally she turned to Dalton. "You I saw two weekends ago. Adam I haven't seen in forever." She glanced back at Adam. "Why is that anyway?"

He grimaced. "Sorry. Busy time of the year."

She nodded. Adam, her oldest brother, owned a successful landscaping business and spring was always a hectic time. They rarely saw him until the fall when business started to slow.

Dalton slung an arm over Celia's shoulders and planted an affectionate kiss on her cheek. "I see Mr. Baseball is here. Must have caught a break before the season starts."

"You guys going to the season opener?" she asked.

"Wouldn't miss it," Adam said.

"I have a favor to ask then."

Both brothers looked curiously at her.

"I'm bringing a client and I'd like to keep my relationship to

Noah on the down low.”

Curiosity gleamed in their eyes. She knew they wanted to ask, but when she didn't volunteer her reasons why, they didn't pursue the matter.

“Okay. Not a problem,” Adam finally said.

“Are you three going to stand out there all day or are you coming in to eat?”

Her father's voice boomed from the front porch, and they turned to see him leaning against the doorframe, impatience evident in his stance.

Celia grinned. “We better go in before he starts muttering threats.”

Adam ruffled her hair then tucked his arm over her neck so he had her in a headlock. He started toward the house, dragging her with him.

When they got to the porch, she laughingly stumbled from Adam's hold and gave her dad a quick hug. He squeezed her and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“Where's Noah?” she asked.

“Where he always is. Parked in front of the big screen, watching baseball.”

She slipped past her father while he greeted his sons and entered the home she'd grown up in. When she got to the living room, she saw Noah sprawled in the recliner, remote in hand as he flipped through footage of past baseball games.

“Hey,” she called.

He looked up, his eyes warming in welcome. As he got up, he smiled broadly at her then held out his arms.

She hugged him then made a show of feeling his ribs.

“They don’t feed you in training camp?”

He laughed. “You know damn well that all I ever do is eat. I think my tapeworms have tapeworms.”

She glanced back to make sure they were still alone and then lowered her voice.

“Are you going to hang around later or do you have to be somewhere?”

His eyes narrowed, and he lost the smile.

“I don’t have to be anywhere today. Why do you ask?”

“I need to talk to you about something. I have a favor to ask, and I’d rather not get into it in front of everyone.”

He frowned now. “Is everything okay, Cece? You in some kind of trouble? Do I need to kill anyone?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re too valuable to go to prison. You’d have Dalton do it anyway.”

Noah smirked. “The pretty boy would be popular in prison.”

“You’re a sick puppy. And no, nothing’s wrong. Promise. Just want to run something by you that could be beneficial to us both.”

“Okay, if you’re going to be all mysterious on me. I guess I can wait until later. You want to go back to your place for a while? I’d invite you to mine but the maid quit on me last week and it’s not a pretty sight. You do have food, right?”

She shook her head. “Yes, I have food, and yes, we can go

back to my place. For God's sake, Noah, how hard is it to pick up after yourself? Or if you can't do that, at least pick up the phone and get another maid service?"

"I've sort of been blackballed," he mumbled. "I have to find an agency where my reputation hasn't preceded me."

"I feel so sorry for the woman you marry. She'll be in ten kinds of hell."

"You don't have to worry because that's not going to happen."

"Sure. Okay. I believe you."

They both looked up when the others spilled into the living room. Noah gave her arm a light squeeze and mouthed "later."

"Food'll be on the table in fifteen minutes," her father announced.

Her mouth watered. She didn't even know what her dad had cooked. It didn't matter. The man was a culinary genius.

Lunch was a rambunctious affair. Her brothers bickered and joked endlessly while her father looked on indulgently. She'd missed all of this during her years in New York. Though she loathed the circumstances that brought her home, she was glad to be back in the comforting circle of her family. Even if they were all just a generation from knuckles-dragging-on-the-ground cavemen.

After the table had been cleared, the argument started over what channel the television landed on. Noah didn't know anything but ESPN or the Food Network existed, Dalton liked anything that was mindless, particularly if explosions were

involved, and Adam liked to torment his brothers by forcing them to watch gardening shows.

Celia settled back to enjoy the sights and sounds of home. Her father sat on the couch next to her and shook his head over his sons' antics.

It was the truth, she'd fled the hovering overprotectiveness of her family. She'd been determined to make her mark on the world while they wanted her to stay home, where they could support her and look out for her.

She wasn't a vain woman, but she knew men found her attractive. She was probably considered beautiful by most, but her looks had been the cause of a lot of problems in her life.

Because of her delicate looks, her brothers and even her father thought her job was just to look pretty and let them provide for her. She hadn't been encouraged to go to college—she'd done all of that on her own—and they certainly hadn't wanted her to have a career in something as demanding as advertising.

She'd ignored their objections. She'd gotten her degree and after graduation, she'd taken a job in New York City. After a couple of years, she'd taken a position with a large, prestigious firm. She was on her way up. A promotion had just cemented her triumph. And then it had all come crashing down like a bridge in an earthquake.

Adam rising from his chair shook her from her angry thoughts. She forced her fingers to relax and winced at the marks she'd left on her palms.

“Leaving already?” she asked.

Adam pulled her up into a bear hug. “Yeah. I need to check on a job. I’ll see you at the season opener, though.”

She kissed his cheek and patted his shoulder affectionately. “Of course.”

She turned to Dalton. “I guess you’ll be going, too, since you brought him over.”

“Yep. I have a date I’ve got to get ready for anyway.”

No one seemed surprised by that announcement.

“I’ll walk you guys out. I need to run, too. I have a pitch to prepare for.”

Her father grimaced, and she steeled herself for another gruff lecture about how she worked too hard. An interesting statement since Adam worked harder than all of them, and no one ever lectured him.

To her surprise, he remained silent. She regarded him with a raised eyebrow and wondered if he’d burst at the seams, but his lips remained in a firm line. He rose from the couch to hug her and then gruffly reminded her to be sure and get enough rest.

They all walked out together, and her father reminded them all of lunch next Sunday. Celia waved to Adam and Dalton before climbing into her car. Noah stood, saying his goodbyes to their father, and she drove down the driveway. Noah would be along shortly and she needed to make sure her pantry would survive the assault.

Celia had just done a cursory examination of her stock of food

—cursing the fact she hadn't been to the market in far too long—when the door buzzer sounded.

She strode across to the call box and mashed the button. “That you, Noah?”

“Yep, buzz me in?”

A few seconds later, Noah walked in, and she smiled her welcome.

“I know that smile,” he said suspiciously. “That’s a smile that says you lured me here under false pretenses. You don’t have any food, do you?”

“Weeeeell, no. But I did just order pizza.”

“You’re forgiven, but I refuse to have a reasonable discussion until it gets here.”

She laughed and punched him on the arm when he flopped on the sofa next to her. “If I didn’t need a favor from you, I’d make you pay for it.”

His expression grew serious. “So what is this favor, anyway?”

“Oh, no. I’m not asking you for anything until you have a full stomach. Again, since you ate not even three hours ago.”

He grunted but didn’t offer any argument. His stomach was too important.

He reached for the remote and flipped on the TV. A few seconds later, the sports recap was on, and he settled back against the couch.

The pizza didn’t take long—thanks to the bistro right around the corner offering delivery service. Soon the decadent smells of

a completely loaded pizza filled her apartment. Despite all she'd eaten at lunch, her stomach growled in anticipation. She eyed the gooey dripping cheese and grimaced. It might taste good, but it would go straight to her hips. Then again, that's what the treadmill was for.

She dropped the box on the coffee table in front of Noah, not bothering with plates. He eyed the mountain of toppings with something akin to bliss.

She waited until he'd grabbed the first piece before she carefully took a slice and nibbled on the end. It was, in a word, sheer heaven. She leaned back and waited for Noah to down the first slice. When he was on his second, he turned and said around a mouthful of pizza, "So what's this favor you need?"

She sat forward, putting half the slice down on a napkin.

"I have this client ... well he's a client I want to land. Evan Reese."

Noah stopped chewing. "The guy who sells athletic wear?"

She nodded. "Yeah. He fired his last agency and has yet to sign with a new one. I want him. Maddox Communications wants him."

"Okay. So where do I fit into the picture?"

For a moment her nerve deserted her, and then she mentally slapped herself upside the head. In her profession there was no room for the spineless. She hadn't worked her way into the confidence of Brock Maddox acting like a jellyfish.

"I want you to agree to front his new line of athletic wear."

Noah blinked then he frowned, and finally he put down his half-eaten slice. For a moment he was quiet. She waited, fully expecting him to say no or to launch into all the reasons why he didn't take endorsement deals. She knew them all. But he did none of those things. Instead he studied her carefully, his gaze sliding over her features as though he was reaching right into her head and pulling out her every thought.

He wouldn't ask why him. He was a huge name in baseball, and he was more sought after than any other professional athlete mainly because of his refusal to take endorsement deals. Instead of deterring companies, it made them all the more determined to be the first to lure Noah Hart to their brand.

She could beg. She could hurry through a prepared explanation as to why she needed him, but she wasn't going to wheedle and cajole.

Noah was still frowning as he studied her. "This is important to you."

She nodded. "Evan is a big client. My boss is trusting me to land the account. Don't get me wrong, I'll get him with or without you, but you'd be the nail in his coffin. Plus it would be huge for you. Reese will pay a lot to have you be the spokesman for his sportswear."

Noah sighed. "I wish you'd just quit this job. You don't have to work, and you know it. You don't have to prove yourself to anyone, Cece. Certainly not to your family. Adam, Dalton and I make more than enough money to support you. It would make

Dad happy if you didn't have such a stressful job. He's convinced you'll have an ulcer before you're thirty."

She smiled faintly. "I am thirty."

He shot her an impatient look.

"Look, Noah, would you quit baseball just because your brothers make enough money to support you? They do, you know."

A derisive, strangling sound rose from his throat. He licked his lips as if to rid himself of a really bad taste.

"It's different."

"I know, I know. You're a man, and I'm a woman." Her lips curled in disgust. "Noah, I love you dearly. You're the best brother a girl could ask for. But you're a chauvinist to your toes."

He huffed but didn't dispute her accusation. Then his expression grew thoughtful again. "I assume you've done your research on this man and his company."

Celia nodded before he'd even finished. On the surface, Noah looked and acted *laissez-faire*. He had all the appearances of a golden-boy jock whose only concern might be fast cars and faster women. But beneath that illusion lay a man who had a deep social conscience.

His refusal of endorsement deals had gained him a reputation of eccentricity from some. Others regarded him incredulously as a fool to pass on the opportunity to make millions by doing nothing more than lend his name to countless companies willing to part with their dollars for his endorsement. But the simple fact

was that Noah did meticulous research on all the corporations that approached him, and so far none had passed muster with him.

“E-mail it all to me. I’ll take a look. If it checks out, I’m willing to listen to his offer.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Noah. You’re the best.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll be so grateful that you’ll volunteer to clean my apartment?”

She snorted and picked up her slice of pizza again. “Put it this way. I’d rather quit my job and let you and Adam support me than clean your place.”

He winced. “Well, damn. No need to be so mean about it.”

“Poor baby. Oh, hey, I need one more favor.”

His eyes narrowed, and he glared at her. “You just turn down my request for you to play cleaning lady and you insult me in the process and then have the cheek to want another favor?”

“How about I find you a replacement cleaning service? Then both of us are happy.”

He got a hopeful puppy dog look that would probably make mush of most women. Thankfully she was his sister and completely immune to any adorableness on his part.

“Okay, you find me someone to clear a path in my apartment and whatever this other favor of yours is I’ll do it.”

“Wow—and you don’t even know what it is.”

“Should tell you how desperate I am,” he muttered.

She laughed and punched him in the arm. “All I need are two very cushy seats behind home plate for the season opener. I’ll be taking Evan. Hopefully.”

“Anyone ever tell you how expensive you are?”

“Hey, wait a second. A minute ago, you were trying to convince me to quit my job so you could support me.”

His expression went from teasing to serious with one blink. “I just worry about you, Cece. That’s all. What happened in New York would have never occurred if—”

She stiffened and held her hand, halting him in mid-sentence. “I don’t want to talk about New York.”

Regret flashed in his eyes. “Sorry. Consider it dropped.”

She waited for her pulse to settle and then she forced a smile. “So you’ll take a look at the research I’ve compiled? You’ll like Reese. He’s a veritable Boy Scout. His employees love him. He has a cracking health-insurance plan. He’s had no layoffs since his business started and he’s not shipping jobs or production overseas. Let’s see. What else? He’s a regular contributor to a half dozen pet charities—”

Noah held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, he’s a saint. I get it. How do other men ever measure up?”

“Cut the sarcasm.”

He checked his watch and let out a sigh. “Sorry to break this up so early, especially since I haven’t finished the pizza. *Somebody* talked too much. Very distracting. E-mail me the stuff. I’ll take a look. And the tickets will be waiting for you at the box office.”

“You always were my favorite sibling,” she said affectionately. He dropped a kiss on top of her head then stood and stretched lazily.

“I’ll give you a call when I’m through reading everything.”

Three

Evan walked into the suite of offices he leased for the times he was in San Francisco. It wasn't home, and though Union Square was a sumptuous neighborhood that catered to upscale businesses, he preferred the funky modern feel of Seattle.

He nodded a good morning to his receptionist but halted when she came out of her seat, a concerned expression on her face.

"You shouldn't go in there," Tanya said in a hushed whisper.

He raised an eyebrow when he realized she was gesturing toward his office.

"Why the devil not?" he demanded.

She put one hand up to shield her mouth and then she tapped her finger against her palm—in the direction of his office.

"Because *she's* in there."

Evan turned to stare down the hall toward his office, but the door was closed. Damn, but he didn't have time for this. He looked back at Tanya and tried to stifle his growing impatience. The girl was highly efficient if a little eccentric. But he liked unconventional, and while she'd probably fit in better with his Seattle staff with her colored hair, multiple piercings and vintage 1930s clothing, he found she brought a sort of vibrancy to an otherwise stuffy office here.

"Okay, Tanya. First of all, who the hell is 'she' and where is Vickie?"

It wasn't like Vickie not to meet him as he got off the elevator. His longtime assistant traveled with him everywhere. She had an apartment here and in Seattle. She had an uncanny knack for knowing precisely when he'd show up, and as a result she was always there, ready to pelt him with the day's obligations.

Tanya's face fell. "Oh, sir, did you not get your message? I left you two. Vickie's granddaughter was rushed to the hospital early this morning. They suspect appendicitis. She's in surgery now."

Evan frowned. "No, I didn't get any such message. Keep me updated. I want to know the minute she's out of surgery. Send flowers and make sure Vickie has everything she might need. On second thought, send over food for the family. Hospital food is terrible. And arrange for a hospitality suite. If there is a hotel close to the hospital, have a block of rooms set aside for any of the family members."

Tanya blinked then hurriedly picked up a notepad and began scribbling.

Evan waited a moment then sighed. "Tanya?"

She looked up, blinking, as if surprised to still see him standing there.

"Who is the 'she' waiting in my office?"

Tanya's nose curled in distaste. "It's Miss Hammond, sir. I couldn't stop her. She was quite imperious. Told me she'd wait for you."

It was all Evan could do not to look heavenward and ask "why me?" He glanced down the hall and briefly considered leaving.

He had no patience for Bettina today, and after his mother had extracted his promise to attend this weekend's debacle, he couldn't imagine anything Bettina could have to say to him.

"Keep me posted on Vickie's granddaughter," he said as he turned to go down to his office.

He opened the door and swept in, his gaze immediately finding Bettina. She was sitting on one of the sofas lining the window that overlooked the outdoor cafés lining the sidewalk below.

"Bettina," he said as he tossed his briefcase onto his desk. "What brings you here?"

Bettina rose, her hands going down to smooth her dress. The motion directed attention to her legs—her self-admitted favorite personal attribute. The dress stopped almost at mid-thigh, which meant quite a lot of those legs were on display.

Evan wouldn't lie. He'd enjoyed those legs. It was just too bad they were attached to the rest of her.

Her expression creased into one of fake pain. She crossed the room, holding her hands dramatically in front of her to grasp his.

"I wanted to thank you for agreeing to come to the wedding. It means the world to Mitchell and your mom and dad. I know how painful it must be. I can't imagine how difficult it was for you to agree to go after I broke your heart."

Evan just stared at her. Part of him wanted to ask her what planet she existed on, but he already knew the answer to that. It was planet Bettina, where everything revolved around her. Did

she honestly believe he was still pining for her?

“Cut the theatrics, Bettina. Why are you really here? You don’t care if I show up or not, so why pretend otherwise? In fact, I’d be willing to admit you hoped I wouldn’t.”

She blinked, and for a moment he saw bitterness in her eyes.

“Lucy said you were bringing a ... date. It was clever of you, really. But you don’t fool me, Evan. Everyone knows you haven’t been serious about anyone since me. Who is she? Someone you’ve met socially? Do you know anything about her? Does she know she’s going as an accessory? God knows that’s all I ever was to you.”

“You can’t have it both ways, Bettina. Either I was serious about you or you were an accessory,” he drawled. “Which is it?”

She flushed angrily. “I only meant that you haven’t dated any woman more than once since I broke things off with you.”

He made an exaggerated expression of surprise. “You flatter me. I had no idea you were so interested in who I date. I would have thought my brother kept you too occupied to monitor my love life.”

“Bring your date, Evan. But you know and I know she isn’t me. She’ll never be me. Don’t think you’ll take anything away from my wedding day.”

With that she stalked out of his office, leaving Evan to shake his head. He really ought to call his brother and thank him profusely.

He sank into his chair and opened his day planner. Vickie

kept meticulous records of all appointments for just such rare occasions that she was out of pocket. He frowned when he saw his calendar was full. Except for one forty-five-minute window for lunch.

His mind immediately went to Celia. Celia, whose office was just two blocks from his. He'd planned to call her, but a proposition such as he had in mind was really better delivered in person. He wouldn't have a lot of time, and he doubted she had much free time, either, but he knew without arrogance that if he asked her to lunch, she wouldn't refuse. She wanted his business too badly.

He hit the button to call Vickie then quickly remembered she wasn't there. He connected to Tanya instead.

"Yes, sir?"

"Tanya, I need Celia Taylor of Maddox Communications on the phone."

Celia stepped out of the elevator and was met with a cheerful hello from Shelby, the receptionist for Maddox Communications. Shelby was young and friendly. She also had superb organization skills and a memory like a steel trap. Which made her a perfect asset. But more importantly, she knew everything about everyone at Maddox. There wasn't a piece of juicy gossip floating around that Shelby didn't know, and she didn't mind sharing it. Celia found it useful to keep in the know. Never again would she be caught off guard like she'd been in her last job.

“Good morning, Shelby,” Celia returned as she paused in front of Shelby’s desk. “Any messages for me?”

Shelby’s eyes twinkled and she leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially. “Latest rumors that have surfaced are about the boss man and his assistant.”

Celia frowned. “You mean, him and Elle?”

Elle didn’t seem like the type to indulge in a torrid office affair and definitely not with her boss. Celia felt compelled to warn Elle about the potential pitfalls of even having such a rumor circulate, but it was just a rumor, and Elle might not appreciate Celia broaching the subject.

Shelby shrugged. “Well, they do seem to spend a lot of time together.”

“Of course they do. She’s his assistant,” Celia pointed out.

“I just repeat what others are saying.”

Celia gripped her briefcase a little tighter. It wouldn’t do her any good to get involved. Brock and Elle were adults. She just hoped Elle wasn’t hurt by the idle gossip.

“Hey, Shelby,” Celia began as she remembered why she’d stopped to begin with. “I need you to look up a cleaning service.” She dug around in her briefcase then pulled out a sheet of paper that had all the names of the agencies Noah had already contacted. She handed it over the counter to Shelby. “These are the ones marked off the list of possibilities. I need you to make it clear this is a demanding client and that he’s a slob through and through. Money is no object but whoever the poor soul is who

takes the job will definitely earn their paycheck.”

Shelby’s eyes widened. “Noah Hart. *The* Noah Hart? He needs a housekeeper? I’m available. I mean, I can totally quit here, right?”

Celia shot her a “get real” look. “Let me know if you find someone. Oh, and I’m expecting a call from Evan Reese’s assistant. I don’t care what I’m doing or who I’m with, make sure I get that call.”

As she walked away, Shelby called out to her. “Hey, wait. How do you know Noah Hart? He’s not a client of Maddox.”

Celia smiled and kept walking toward her office. Normally she’d stop in on some of her coworkers, say hello, get a feel for what the day’s events were, but she was already running late, thanks to a breakfast meeting going well into the brunch hour. She needed to play catch-up on phone messages and e-mails before a full afternoon of client calls and a staff meeting to close out the day.

She’d made a sizeable dent in the backlog of messages when her interoffice intercom buzzed.

“Celia, Mr. Reese is on line two.”

Celia frowned. “Mr. Reese himself or Mr. Reese’s assistant?”

“Mr. Reese.”

“Put him through,” she said crisply.

She wiped her hand on her skirt then shook her head. What did she have to be nervous about? As soon as the phone rang, she picked it up.

“Celia Taylor.”

“Celia, how are you?”

Even his voice sent a bolt of awareness through her body. When would she stop acting like a teenage girl in the throes of her first sexual awakening? It was ridiculous. It wasn't professional.

“I'm good, Evan. And you?”

“I don't have a lot of time. I wanted to meet for lunch today. That is, if your schedule permits?”

There was a note of confidence in his voice. He knew damn well she wouldn't say no. Hastily, she checked the clock.

“What time?”

“Now.”

Panic scuttled around her stomach. Now? She wasn't prepared to meet him now. Surely he didn't want to reschedule their informal pitch session from Friday to now?

“I thought we had a lunch date on Friday?”

She was stalling as her brain scrambled to catch up.

“I want to discuss Friday today. There's been a change of plans.”

Her heart sank. There was no way she could have her act together right now.

“I only have forty-five minutes,” he continued. “We're two blocks apart. Shall we meet in the middle? Our choices are French, Italian or good ole American.”

“I'm up for anything,” she said faintly.

She propped the phone between her shoulder and her ear and

began frantically digging for her notes on his account. She stuffed everything into a folder and reached for her briefcase.

“Great. Shall we meet in say five minutes? I’ll start out now.”

“Sure, meet you there.”

He hung up and for a moment she stood there like a moron, the phone still stuck to her ear. Then she slammed it down, took in a deep steadying breath and declared battle.

She could do this in her sleep.

Slinging the bag over her shoulder, she all but jogged out of her office and down the hallway.

She passed Ash Williams, Maddox’s CFO, who held up a finger and opened his mouth to say something to her.

“Not now, Ash, she called as she hustled by. “Late for an important lunch date.”

She didn’t even look to see his reaction.

She ran past Shelby and hollered back as she punched the button for the elevator.

“If Brock asks, I’m having lunch with Mr. Reese. Just tell him Friday got moved up. If anyone else asks, just tell them I’ll return this afternoon.”

The elevator opened and she ducked in. As she turned around, she saw Shelby’s look of befuddlement just as the doors slid shut again.

When she reached the lobby, she stopped in the bathroom long enough to check her appearance. She wouldn’t stop traffic for sure, but at least she didn’t look as frazzled as she felt.

The heels she'd chosen to complete her outfit were fabulous—as long as she didn't have to actually walk in them. A trek down the block on uneven cement sidewalks wasn't what she had in mind. She kept tennis shoes in her office for just such occasions, but five minutes notice on the most important lunch date of her career didn't give her time to worry over footwear. She'd just suck it up.

When she crossed the street to the next block, she realized she never had gotten where they were supposed to meet. Italian, French or American. Her gaze scanned the bright umbrellas scattered along the sidewalk cafés, first on her side of the street and then across.

A vacuum formed, sucking all the oxygen right out of her lungs the moment she laid eyes on him. He stood in the sunlight, one hand shoved into the pocket of his slacks, the other holding a phone to his ear.

Power. There was an aura of power that surrounded him, and it drew her like a magnet. For a moment, she just stood watching him in absolute girly delight. He was simply. delicious looking.

Then he turned slightly and found her. How, she wasn't sure given how busy the street was, but he locked onto her immediately almost as if he'd sensed her perusal.

She straightened and started forward, embarrassed to have been caught staring.

She crossed the street, hugging her briefcase between her arm and her side. Evan watched her approach, lean hunger gleaming

in his eyes. His features relaxed into a smile as she drew abreast of him.

“Right on time.”

She nodded, not wanting to betray how out of breath she was from her flight from her office.

“I chose good ole American,” he said as he gestured toward a nearby table. “I hope that was all right.”

“Of course.”

He held out his arm for her to precede him to the table at the end of the row. She sat, grateful to be off her feet, and placed her briefcase beside her.

He took his seat across from her and motioned for the waiter.

“Would you like wine?” Evan asked Celia when the waiter approached.

“Whatever you’re having is fine.”

Evan relayed his request and then looked over at Celia. “I asked you to lunch because I’m afraid something has come up and we won’t be able to make our lunch date on Friday.”

She nodded then reached down for her briefcase. “That’s all right. I brought along the information I wanted to present—”

He reached over and circled her wrist with his fingers. “That isn’t why I invited you to lunch.”

She blinked and let go of her briefcase.

“I’d still like to keep our appointment ... I’d just like to change the location.”

She was royally confused now, and it must have shown.

Amusement twinkled in his eyes and he smiled.

“I don’t have a lot of time today, so let me come straight to the point.”

His fingers were still around her wrist, though they’d loosened, and his thumb moved idly over her pulse point. She was sure her pulse was racing. It probably felt like a train under his fingers. She didn’t move. Didn’t even breathe. She didn’t want to lose the marvelous sensation of his touch. Did he have any idea just how devastating his effect on her was?

“I have a wedding this weekend.” She could swear his lips curled in distaste. “A family wedding. My brother is getting married on Catalina Island. I’m to be there Thursday evening, hence the reason I can’t make our Friday meeting.”

“I understand,” she said. “We can reschedule at your convenience.”

“I’d like you to go with me.”

Before she could call back the reaction, her eyes widened and she pulled her hand from his. She put it in her lap and cupped her other hand over it, wanting to preserve the sensation of his fingers over hers.

He put up his hand in an impatient gesture then lowered it and fiddled with the napkin on the table. He seemed almost uneasy. She cocked her head, curious now as to what he would say next.

“My schedule is quite busy. I need to move on this new campaign. I can’t spare weeks searching for a new agency. If you went with me, I could listen to your ideas. I realize a wedding

isn't ideal. I'd rather be just about any other place myself."

Though it certainly wasn't voiced as a threat, it was certainly implied. If she went with him, he'd listen to her pitch. If she didn't he might not have time for her when he returned.

Worry knotted her stomach. Tagging along to a family wedding seemed entirely too personal even if the purpose was solely business. Not to mention it was hard enough to battle her attraction for him in a business setting. But something as intimate as a wedding?

"How long would we be ... away?"

The question came out more as a squeak than a concise, professional query. She sounded like a scared little girl facing the big bad wolf. Oh, but Evan made such a yummy wolf.

It was all she could do not to put her head on the table and bang a few times.

"We'd fly out Thursday evening. Rehearsal and dinner on Friday, wedding Saturday with reception to follow and since it will likely go well into the night, we'd return Sunday."

It would only require one missed day of work. No one but Brock would even need to know, and he certainly wouldn't spill the beans.

She didn't know why she hadn't immediately agreed. She couldn't afford to say no. He had her over a barrel and he damn well knew it. Still, she hesitated—if for no other reason than to let him know he didn't call all the shots.

Okay, so maybe he did, but it didn't hurt him to think

otherwise. For two seconds.

“All right,” she said in as level a voice as she could manage.

Did he expect her to attend the festivities? It certainly sounded as though he did by the way he outlined the events. She supposed it would be rude to tag along and lurk in the shadows waiting for her appointed time. Or maybe he envisioned having her follow him around everywhere so he could fit in snatches of conversation when possible.

“I’d be happy to purchase any items you may need for the trip,” he said.

Startled, she glanced up. “No, I mean ... no. Of course not. I can manage just fine. You’ll need to tell me the appropriate dress code of course.”

He managed a wry smile. “I’m sure anything to do with Bettina will be formal. Quite formal with lots of glitter and fanfare.”

His gaze slid sensuously over her features and then lower until her neck heated with a blush.

“I think anything you wear will be stunning. The dress you wore the other night was perfection on you.”

The blush climbed higher and she prayed her cheeks didn’t look like twin torches.

“I’m sure I can find something glitzy and glamorous,” she said lightly. “We girls do like the opportunity to play dress up.”

Interest sparked in his eyes. “I can’t wait.”

The waiter returned with the wine, and Celia latched gratefully onto the glass. Her hands shook. She was sure if she stood, she’d

go down like a brick. She'd break an ankle trying to stay up on these ridiculous heels.

Note to self: Don't pack gorgeous, sexy shoes for the weekend. Around him, she'd be a disaster on stilts. He'd spend his entire time picking her up off the floor, that is if she didn't end up in the hospital in traction.

"I'll call you later in the week with the flight arrangements. We'll be taking my private jet."

She swallowed and nodded, then realizing he'd need her number—her cell number and not her office number—she reached down into her briefcase to retrieve a business card.

She frowned, fumbled some more then pulled the bag into her lap. With a groan she realized her business-card holder must have fallen out. Impatiently she tore a piece of paper off a notepad and took out her pen.

Dropping the bag again, she put the paper on the table and hastily scribbled her home and cell number then passed it across the table to Evan.

He took it, studied it a moment then carefully folded it and tucked it away in the breast pocket of his jacket. The waiter approached with menus and Evan looked to her for her order.

"Just the lunch salad," she said. What she really wanted was a really greasy burger with onion rings, but she didn't want to appall Evan. Her brothers gave her all sorts of hell for her indelicate tastes, but then they were to blame for them.

Evan ordered a steak, medium, and after the waiter was gone,

Evan stared over at her, his gaze inquisitive.

She cocked her head, prepared for him to ask her a question, but he didn't say anything. He just seemed to study her as if he wanted to uncover all her deep, dark secrets.

Finally he sat back with a satisfied smile. His eyes glinted with triumph.

“I think this wedding is going to turn out to be enjoyable after all.”

Four

Celia stepped off the elevator and walked by Shelby, who held her hand up to get Celia's attention.

"Later, Shelby," she called as she headed for Brock's office.

When she got to his door, she was nearly run over as Ash came out. He sidestepped her and kept on walking, his forehead wrinkled as if he were lost in thought. She wasn't even sure he'd seen her.

She stuck her head in Brock's door and breathed a sigh of relief when she found him alone. He glanced up and motioned her in.

"What's with him?" she asked, jerking her head over her shoulder in Ash's direction. "He's been weird lately."

Brock gave her one of those puzzled male looks that suggested he didn't have a clue what she was talking about. She rolled her eyes. Ash had been walking around in a fog, which wasn't typical. He was usually on top of everything and everyone. Celia had overheard Shelby talking about a falling out with a girlfriend, but then she hadn't even known Ash had been seeing anyone. Not that he would have confided in her.

She didn't bother sitting. She had too much to do, and this wouldn't take long.

"I have to go out of town Thursday afternoon."

Brock stared back at her for a moment and then his brows

drew together. He frowned and dropped the pen he'd been fiddling with.

"Is this some kind of emergency? You're supposed to meet with Evan Reese on Friday."

His tone suggested someone better be dying. He opened his mouth to say more but before he got off on the tangent she knew was coming, she held up her hand.

"I just had lunch with Evan. There's been a change in plans. He has to be at some family wedding this weekend in Catalina so he couldn't make it on Friday. He said he wants to move on this campaign and he doesn't have a lot of time to spend in the selection process."

Brock swore, his face going red. He picked the pen back up and flung it across his desk. "Dammit, is he even going to listen to our pitch?"

She sucked in a breath. "He wants me to go to Catalina with him. We'd leave Thursday afternoon. It's the only time he can spare me and he's promised to listen to my ideas while we're there."

Brock's brow furrowed further and he studied her intently.

"I see."

Forgetting about all she needed to do and that she didn't want to be stuck here in Brock's office forever, she sank down into one of the chairs and stared glumly at her boss.

"I told him I'd go. I didn't see that I had a choice. While he didn't come out and say it, he implied that if I didn't, he was

prepared to go with another agency.”

“I agree you should go. Does that make me an ass?”

Celia laughed, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. “No, it doesn’t make you an ass. I guess I just worry about the fallout. It’s stupid. I shouldn’t care. I never would have before, but I know what will be said if it gets out and how things will be twisted.”

“You have my support, Celia, and you have the support of the agency. Don’t ever doubt that.”

She rose and smiled gratefully at him. “Thank you, Brock.”

He grunted. “Get me the damn account. That’s all the thanks I need.”

She stopped on her way out, put her hand on the door frame and looked back. “I’ll need someone to cover for me on Friday. I have two client appointments, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.”

“Jason will cover for you. You just worry about knocking Evan Reese’s socks off.”

“I will,” Celia murmured. “I will.”

On her way down the hall, her BlackBerry rang and she dug into the pocket of her briefcase for it. Seeing Noah’s number on the LCD, she mashed the answer button and stuck the phone to her ear as she walked into her office.

“I’m working on the maid service,” she said in lieu of hello.

Noah chuckled. “Great, I nearly killed myself getting out of bed this morning. You’d be amazed how dangerous a pair of dirty underwear can be.”

Her nose wrinkled in disgust. “Would you at least try not to send the maid screaming from your house on her first day? That’s just gross.”

He made a derisive sound. “So I read through the info you sent. I also had my agent do some checking. I might add that my agent is orgasmic that I’m considering this endorsement deal.”

“Tell him I expect a nice Christmas gift as thank you,” Celia said.

“Oh, please. He doesn’t even give his mother presents.”

Usually she wouldn’t mind chatting mindlessly with her siblings, but she had a hundred things to do before Thursday, including figure out how she was going to survive a weekend on an island with a man who made mincemeat of her willpower.

“So does this mean you’ll consider it?”

There was a pause, and she found herself holding her breath.

“Yeah. He checks out. He seems as solid as you said he was. I’ll talk to him if nothing else.”

She did a double-fist pump and dropped her bag on the floor by her desk.

“Have his people call my people,” Noah said airily.

Celia laughed. “I am his people. Or at least I will be.”

“Hey, you going to be at Dad’s this weekend?”

She winced when she remembered that she’d told their father she would indeed be there for Sunday dinner again.

“Afraid not. Something’s come up.”

Noah made a disapproving sound. “Don’t you ever take off?”

It's Sunday, for Pete's sake."

"How do you know it's work?" she defended. "Maybe I have a hot date."

He snorted. "When was the last time you went on a hot date? It's always work with you."

Knowing they were about to get into lecture territory again, Celia cut him off before he got carried away.

"Hey, I have to run, Noah. Have a meeting in five minutes. I'll call you later, okay?"

Before he could call her a liar, she hung up and plopped into her chair. She blew out a long sigh of relief and closed her eyes.

It was all coming together. Not without a few potholes, but it was within reach. All she had to do was hold it together and get through the weekend and the account would be hers.

"Knock, knock."

Celia opened her eyes to see Jason Reagart standing in her doorway.

"Brock told me I needed to cover for you on Friday, so I stopped by so you could get me up to speed on what I need to know."

"Yeah, have a seat. Give me a minute. Been running all morning. I'll dig out my notes."

Jason eased into a chair, his long legs eating up most of the space between it and her desk. Celia picked up her beleaguered briefcase and opened it on her desk.

"So how is Lauren?"

She hated idle conversation, but the silence was more awkward and she hadn't planned on having to turn over the two meetings to anyone, so her notes were haphazard at best.

"Pregnant. Grumpy. You know, typical pregnant woman."

Celia scowled at him over the top of her briefcase. "Like you wouldn't be if you had to deal with water retention, hormones and arrogant men?"

Jason laughed. "Hey, I spoil her rotten."

"As you should. Ah, here we go."

She pulled out a folder and tossed it to Jason.

"Everything you need to know for the morning meeting is on pages one through three. This isn't a big deal. They just need a little hand holding and a little ego stroking. Bowl them over with how Maddox is going to make them look good while increasing their exposure by three hundred percent and they'll be fine."

Jason flipped through the pages, his brow creased in concentration. She felt comfortable leaving her clients in his very capable hands. He took his job very seriously and moreover, he was damn good at what he did. Maddox had landed a huge account thanks to him, and if Celia had her way, she was going to top that by landing Evan Reese.

"And the afternoon meeting?" Jason asked.

"Hopefully you can read my notes. I have the PowerPoint presentation ready to go. They need to view it and sign off or suggest any changes so we can move it into the production stage. Impress upon them that this is their last chance to see it before

it goes nationwide so make sure they're happy with it."

He nodded and straightened the papers before closing the folder. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Brock said you were going to be out of town. Hope everything is all right."

There was a subtle question there, and she knew he hoped she'd expound on her reasons for not being there on Friday. She was just grateful Brock hadn't told him where she was going and why.

She smiled. "Everything's fine, and thank you again for stepping in on such short notice. I owe you one. Send Lauren my love. I'll have to remember to buy her a gift certificate from my favorite spa. I can't think of a pregnant woman alive who wouldn't appreciate a massage."

Jason sent her a disgruntled look. "I don't want some beefcake putting his hands on my wife."

Celia rolled her eyes. "The poor woman can't see her feet and is probably miserable, and you're going to be picky about who gives her some relief?"

"Damn right I am!"

Celia made a shooing motion with her hands. "Out. I have work to do."

And she made a mental note to call her salon and make an appointment for Lauren. She'd ask for the hunkiest massage therapist they had.

Five

The car that Evan had sent to collect Celia pulled up to the plane parked on the paved landing area that led to the single runway and stopped just a few feet from where the door to the jet lay open.

Celia looked out the window to see Evan standing a short distance away. He was waiting for her.

The driver opened her door, and she stepped into the afternoon sun. She blinked a few times then pulled her shades from her head over her eyes. Maybe then it wouldn't be so obvious how she ate Evan up with her gaze.

He was dressed casually. Jeans, polo shirt and loafers. She'd only ever seen him in suits, and she hadn't imagined he could look better. She was wrong. So, so wrong.

The jeans cupped him in all the right places. They clung to his thighs, rounded his butt and molded to his groin. They weren't new, starched-looking jeans, either. They were faded and worn, just like a good pair of jeans should be.

"Celia," he said with a nod as she approached. "If you're ready, we can be on our way."

"I just need to get my luggage ..."

She turned to see that the driver was handing her luggage to a uniformed man.

"Okay then, I'm ready," she said cheerfully.

He smiled and motioned for her to precede him onto the plane. She mounted the steps and ducked inside.

Her eyes widened at the luxurious interior. It was simple and understated, but she recognized it for what it was. Very expensive comfort. She shoved her shades up so she could get a better look.

There was nothing gaudy about any of the furnishings. It looked very masculine. It even smelled masculine. Leather and suede. Earth tones.

Beyond the three rows of seats, there was a small sitting area with a couch and one chair with a coffee table and a television. To her left between the seats and the cockpit was a small galley area complete with a steward.

The older man smiled at her and welcomed her on board.

As she and Evan took their seats, the steward introduced himself as William and asked her if she wanted a drink.

She glanced at Evan then back at William. "Do you have wine?"

William smiled. "But of course. Mr. Reese keeps the airplane stocked with all the necessities."

She'd agree that wine was very necessary.

A few moments later, William returned with two glasses of wine.

"The pilot wished me to tell you he is ready for takeoff at your convenience."

Evan took the glasses and offered one to Celia.

"Tell him I'm ready."

“Very good, sir. I’ll close the doors and we’ll take off shortly.”

“Comfortable?” Evan asked Celia.

She settled back into her seat and sipped at her wine. “Mmm, very. Nice jet.”

She should have sat across the aisle from him, but that would be rude since he’d chosen the seat next to her. His nearness was killing her, though. His scent drifted enticingly across her nostrils and she could *feel* his heat. When he moved, his arm brushed against hers, and short of shifting in her seat—which would be terribly obvious—there was no escaping him. Furthermore, she didn’t really want to.

It was on the tip of her tongue to suggest they use the time on the flight to go over her ideas, but she couldn’t bring herself to have business intrude.

She mentally shook herself. Intrude on what? This wasn’t some romantic getaway. It *was* business. Only business and nothing else.

It was unfair that she should be attracted to someone who was a solid no in her rule book. She’d never broken that unspoken rule. She had never been tempted to get involved with someone she worked with, or worse—a client. It didn’t matter, though, because she’d carry the stigma of someone who advanced her career by bestowing sexual favors.

The memory sent rage curdling through her veins. She had to work at keeping her fingers relaxed. She’d worked damn hard to go beyond her family’s expectations. And to have it all taken

away by someone in a position of power over her made her head explode.

The advertising community was small, and gossip was rampant. She was under no illusion that fleeing New York made it possible for her to leave what happened behind. It hadn't been private. It had been very, very public.

She knew speculation ran wide. She knew people talked. Knew her coworkers probably whispered behind her back and pondered the possibility that she'd slept with Brock or Flynn Maddox to secure her position in the agency and to be granted the opportunity to land Evan Reese's account. They probably thought she'd do whatever it took to persuade Evan.

The only person she'd bothered to defend herself to was Brock, and she figured she owed him that much if he was going to hire her. Only he knew the truth about what really happened at her former agency. And when he'd assured her that she'd suffer no such situation here, she'd believed him. It might make her unbelievably naive after her last run-in with her boss, but Brock struck her as a deeply honorable man, and more importantly, someone who kept his word.

"Is everything all right?"

Evan's softly spoken question jarred her from her thoughts. His hand had gone to hers, and he carefully uncurled her fingers that were wound so tightly that the tips were white.

"Do you have a fear of flying?"

She shook her head. "Sorry. I was thinking about something

else.”

He studied her intently, his gaze stroking her cheeks and then her mouth.

“Seems a shame to waste time on such unpleasant thoughts.”

The urge to deny that her thoughts had been unpleasant lasted all of about two seconds. She wrinkled her nose and grinned ruefully.

“Busted.”

He chuckled. “I like an honest woman.”

It was then she realized that they were already in the air. Wow, she really must have been intensely lost in thought to have missed the takeoff.

“Relax. There’ll be plenty of time to discuss business during our stay. Let’s begin the trip by enjoying the short flight.”

Either she was exceedingly transparent or he’d just anticipated her jumping into things right away. Either way, she was perfectly willing to delay their discussion until she felt a little more on equal footing. Sitting here in such close proximity on his jet, drinking his wine ... it was more than a little overwhelming.

His hand remained on hers, his thumb sliding idly over her knuckles in a soothing pattern. She liked it. She liked it too much.

Survive, Celia. Survive this weekend. Be a professional. After this weekend you’ll only have to see him in a business environment.

She swallowed and let calm descend. There was no way she’d screw this opportunity up just because she couldn’t get all her girly hormones in check.

The flight went quickly, and oddly, after the first awkward moments, Celia sat back and enjoyed the casual conversation with Evan. William had kept a steady presence to refill their wineglasses and offer a variety of finger foods. By the time they landed at the Airport in the Sky, Celia was limber and completely relaxed. Probably due to the wine.

They were met by a hotel representative and were quickly whisked into a waiting shuttle. It only took a few minutes to arrive at the gorgeous beachfront resort. It was so beautiful, it took her breath away.

The sunset over the water gave the place a decidedly romantic feel, but then they were here for a wedding, so Celia supposed it was only appropriate that romance positively danced on the air.

Evan escorted Celia through the glass doors into the lobby. A bellhop followed behind with a rolling cart that held their luggage.

“Wait right here,” Evan murmured. “Take a seat if you like. I’ll get our room keys so we can go up.”

Before he could go, a feminine voice rent the air.

“Evan! Oh, Evan, you’re here!”

Evan stiffened against Celia. He went positively rigid, and Celia could swear she heard him curse under his breath. Celia turned in the direction of the call and saw a regally dressed older woman hurrying across the lobby, her heels tapping delicately on the polished floor.

Behind her, a grim faced older gentleman flanked by a

younger woman and a man who looked slightly younger than Evan, walked slower but with no less purpose in Evan's direction.

To her surprise, Evan took her left hand in his and held it close to his side. He fumbled with her fingers even as he looked up with a welcoming smile. It looked completely forced to Celia, but the woman didn't seem put off.

The woman threw her arms around Evan, and still, he didn't let go of Celia's hand. He returned her embrace with his free arm and said, "Hello, Mom. I told you I was coming."

"I know, but after Bettina told me she'd been to see you and when she told me that ..."

She broke off and looked curiously at Celia, whose hand was still securely held in Evan's.

Then his mom looked back at Bettina, confusion clear in her eyes.

"But my dear, you told me that Evan wasn't seeing anyone, that he just told me that to ease my concern."

"Did she?" Evan asked in an even tone. He pinned Bettina with a stare that would have had Celia fidgeting.

His mom nudged him impatiently. "Well, introduce us, Evan."

"Yes, do introduce us," Bettina said in a chilly voice.

About the time she felt Evan's grip on her hand tighten and the cool metal slide over her finger, Celia regretted having agreed to come. She tried to look down, wondering what Evan had done to her finger, but he kept his hand over hers. Awkward didn't begin to cover it. She felt as if she'd just entered a minefield.

“Mom. Dad. Bettina. Mitchell.” His lips curled when he said the last and Celia zeroed in on the man in question. He had to be Evan’s brother. The similarity was striking. “I’d like you to meet—” His entire body tensed and he gripped her hand almost painfully. It was like he was sending her a silent message. “I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Celia Taylor.”

Six

Celia froze. There was a horrible buzz in her ears, and she stared in horror at Evan. She hadn't heard him right. What kind of idiotic thing had he just done?

She wasn't sure who was more stunned. Her or his family. Bettina looked as if she just swallowed a lemon. Mitchell looked annoyed, while Evan's father simply frowned. His mom was the only person who actually seemed happy about the bomb.

"Oh, Evan, that's wonderful!"

Celia found herself in the older woman's arms and was hugged so tight that she was in danger of passing out.

"I'm so glad to meet you, my dear."

She held Celia out at arm's length and beamed at her. Then she proceeded to kiss her on both cheeks and if that wasn't enough, she yanked her into another long hug.

This was insane. Evan was insane. His entire family was nuts. She opened her mouth to blast Evan with both barrels and ask him what the hell kind of stunt he was trying to pull when Evan's father put his hand on Evan's shoulder to steer him away from the women.

"Come with me and we'll get you checked in and get your keys. Then you can take Celia up to the room."

Evan looked a little reluctant to leave her. She could well imagine why.

It was then that she remembered her finger. He'd put something on her finger.

She looked down. Holy cow! He'd slipped a huge diamond engagement ring on her finger while he'd held her hand. Fury simmered in her veins. She mentally counted to ten just so she didn't explode on the spot. The bastard had planned this all along. No one carried around a rock like this for the hell of it.

"You two go on ahead and be seated. Order our drinks. Marshall and I will be along in just a moment. I want the chance to speak to Celia for a moment."

Celia regarded Evan's mom warily as she shooed Mitchell and Bettina on toward the hotel restaurant.

When they'd disappeared, only after Bettina had glared enough holes in Celia to rival a hunk of Swiss cheese, Evan's mom seized Celia's hands and squeezed affectionately.

"Oh, my dear, I'm so thrilled to meet you. I can't tell you how fantastic your news is. I was so worried about Evan. He didn't take Bettina's defection very well, but look at you! Even more gorgeous than Bettina. I can see why Evan was so taken with you."

Celia opened her mouth and halted. What on earth could she say? With every word that poured out of the other woman's mouth, the more furious Celia became and the more sickened she was by Evan's deception.

This was some huge soap opera. Things like this didn't happen in real life. Even in really wealthy people's lives, surely.

“By the way, I don’t think I introduced myself ... well, other than as Evan’s mother. I’m Lucy. Please do call me Lucy. Mrs. Reese just sounds so formal and we’re going to be family after all.”

Celia’s heart sank. Lucy obviously was a really wonderful lady and super kindhearted, which only made her angrier that Evan had just lied to her. What the hell had he been thinking?

But then Lucy’s other statement came back to her. The part about Bettina’s defection, and suddenly it all made sense.

“Bettina and Evan were involved?” Celia asked.

Lucy colored slightly and looked abashed. “Oh, heavens, I’ve said too much. I always do have a problem with just prattling on. Do forgive me.”

Celia smiled. “It’s all right. Truly. It is one of those things women like to know. Men are so thick when it comes to these things, but if any awkwardness can be avoided, I would like to know.”

And she could go straight to hell for lying, too. She’d just make sure Evan got there first for his role in this debacle.

“It’s all in the past. Rest assured.”

“Naturally,” Celia said drily.

“Evan and Bettina were engaged. It was a long engagement. The truth of the matter is, I’m just not sure how much of Evan’s affections were engaged. Bettina and Mitchell fell in love, and well, it’s obvious to anyone that those two were meant for each other. Evan didn’t take it well, though, and if I hadn’t begged him

to come to the wedding, I have no doubt he wouldn't be here."

Lucy smiled and reached out to touch Celia's arm. "Bettina led me to believe that Evan was just going on about being involved because he wasn't over her yet and didn't want to worry me, but I can see that isn't the case. You're even more beautiful than Bettina. I can tell by the way he looks at you that he's besotted. He never looked at Bettina that way."

You are such a sucker, Celia. There should be a law about being so stupid when it came to men. But then she'd spend a lot of time behind bars if that were the case.

She felt Evan's approach. It was hard to miss all that tension. Celia glanced up and met his gaze, and she didn't at all try to disguise her fury. Let him stew. He was damn lucky she liked his mom so much or she would have denounced him in front of the entire hotel lobby.

The poor woman didn't deserve to be humiliated just because her son was a first-rate ass.

Evan regarded her warily even as he turned to his mom. "We'll catch up tomorrow, Mom, okay? Celia and I have had a long day and we'd like to go up and have dinner in the room."

Lucy patted Evan on the cheek and then leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him. "Of course, dear. I'll see you both tomorrow for rehearsal."

She reached back and squeezed Celia's hand. "It was so nice meeting you, Celia."

She walked toward Evan's father and the two went in the

direction of the restaurant, leaving Celia and Evan standing in the middle of the lobby.

“We’re on the top level,” Evan said evenly. He gestured toward the elevator and Celia strode in that direction.

They rode up in silence, the tension so thick Celia felt like the entire elevator would explode before it stopped. It was all she could not to tap her foot in agitation as she waited for the doors to open.

When they finally did, Celia stepped out, glanced down the hall and then back at Evan.

“My key,” she said pointedly. “What room am I in?”

Evan sighed and pointed at the end. “We’re in the two-bedroom suite on the end.”

Her mouth fell open. She reached forward and snatched the key card from his grasp. Then she spun on her heel and stalked down the hall. The hell she’d share a room with him. He could go find other accommodations or he could bunk with his brother. They’d probably have a lot to talk about. Maybe they could compare notes on Bettina.

She jammed the card into the lock, listened for the snick and then shoved it open. She stepped inside and slammed the door in Evan’s face.

Her feet were killing her, she was angry as hell and she was hungry. And she needed to figure out how to get off this damn island.

She kicked off her shoes and then sat on the edge of the couch

next to the table with the hotel directory and a telephone. Surely the front desk could make arrangements for her departure.

The sound of the door opening had her on her feet again, and she glared indignantly as Evan walked in and shut the door behind him. He held up another key card in explanation.

He looked tired and resigned.

“Look, I know you’re angry.”

She held up a hand. “Don’t you dare patronize me. You have no idea how furious I am. Angry doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

He blew out his breath and ran a hand through his hair. He tossed his suit coat onto the arm of the couch.

She pointed to the door with a shaking finger. “Out. I won’t share a suite with you. I don’t care how many bedrooms it has.”

“I need a drink,” Evan muttered.

The man wouldn’t even fight with her, and by God she wanted a fight.

“You never had any intention of listening to my ideas, did you?”

He stopped on his way over to the liquor cabinet and turned back around to stare at her. He had the audacity to look puzzled.

“I’ve been such an idiot. I can’t believe I fell for this crap. How this was the only time you could fit me in. Blah, blah, blah. How naive does that make me? How stupid does it make me?”

He held up a hand and took a step in her direction. “Celia ...”

“Don’t Celia me,” she whispered furiously. It galled her that she could feel the prick of tears. He would not make her cry. She

was through letting men make her cry.

She needed to pull it together and be professional. A really nasty, vivid curse word, one that she'd learned from her brothers burst into her mind. It was certainly appropriate under the circumstances.

Screw professional.

"I have had it with men who manipulate me because of my looks. Here's a clue. I can't help the way I look and it doesn't give you the license to use me or make assumptions about my character. And it damn sure doesn't give you the right to use me to lie to your mother because your fiancée humiliated you by dumping you for your brother. Here's another clue. Crap happens. It happens all the time. Get over it."

Evan's hands closed over her shoulders. She tried to flinch away, but he held tight. There was honest regret in his eyes, but there was also determination. Stubborn determination.

"Sit down, Celia," he ordered in a low voice.

She gaped at him.

"Please."

It was the please that did it. Or maybe it was how tired and resigned he sounded. Or maybe it was the bleak light that entered his eyes. Or maybe she was just a flaming idiot who deserved everything she got for being sucked into this in the first place.

She sank onto the sofa, her entire body trembling as he took a seat beside her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't expect you to believe I didn't do

this maliciously or to hurt you. I swear, I didn't."

She cast a sideways glance at him.

He sighed. "Someone really did a number on you, didn't they?"

She turned away, refusing to give him confirmation.

"Celia, look at me."

He waited, and she stared ahead. Still, he waited. Finally, she gave in and turned to look at him.

"I completely and utterly messed this up. I freely admit it. I expected to have time to discuss this with you before we ran into my family."

She struggled to control her temper. He obviously wanted a reasonable discussion when she was feeling anything but reasonable. What she really wanted was to crack his skull on the coffee table and leave, but then she'd be without a room, and if anyone was sleeping in the hallway, it wasn't going to be her.

"First, this has nothing—and I mean nothing—to do with you landing my account. You're going to have to do that on your business and advertising savvy. I'm not putting my entire company in the hands of a woman based on her looks or anything else. Can we at least be clear on that?"

She swallowed. "That's not how it looks to me, Evan. It looks to me like I got played for the fool and that you led me here on the premise of listening to my pitch when you never had any intention of this being about business. Tell me this much, have you already signed with Golden Gate? You owe me that much honesty at least."

Evan gripped a handful of his hair and closed his eyes. "You're pissed. I get it. You have every right to be, but will you please listen to my explanation. If afterward you want me to take a flying leap, I'll be more than happy to accommodate you. You'll never hear from me again."

"I think you know I don't have any other choice," she said helplessly.

"I'll try to make this as short and as concise as possible."

She nodded.

"I didn't have any intention of coming to this damn wedding. I couldn't care less if they live happily ever after and I have even less interest in being here to wish them well along that path to happily ever after.

"Then my mother called and she begged me to come. She was worried that I wasn't over Bettina and that's why I wouldn't come. The woman has a heart of gold, but she obviously knows nothing about me or she'd realize that Bettina was nothing to me the moment she left me for what she perceived to be the better catch."

"Harsh," Celia murmured.

"Is it? I'm only speaking the truth. Bettina was calculating. She hedged her bets and went with Mitchell as soon as he was named my father's successor in the family jewelry business. To her it seemed a more glamorous life. I'd like to be a fly on the wall when she realizes how wrong she is."

Celia's lips curled in amusement. "Not feeling a wee bit

vindictive, are you?"

He gave a short laugh. "I may not harbor any love for the woman, and I may not be a bit sorry that she's out of my life, but she is a manipulative cat, and I won't be sorry to see her suffer for the choice she made."

"So your mom doesn't think you're over Bettina. That has what to do with me and this hoax you're perpetuating? Which I really resent by the way because your mom is nice. I feel like pond scum for deceiving her."

"I'm getting there. Just bear with me. When I got off the phone with Mom, I was angry because I let her talk me into going and I said as a last-minute thing that I was bringing someone. I fully intended to look up someone I'd seen casually in the past. Then I remembered that Friday I was supposed to be meeting you and that this meeting was extremely important to me. It seemed logical to combine the two and bring you out with me. I didn't lie about needing to move on this fast. I've wasted weeks listening to pitches. I'm ready to move."

"I'm still seeing a *but* here," she muttered.

"The but occurred when Bettina herself came to see me. She was steamed that I had the audacity to bring someone to her wedding. She felt like it was a poke in the eye at her, and if you can believe, she honestly thinks I'm still pining over her. She basically accused me of being a fraud and of trying to upstage her at her own wedding."

Celia burst out laughing. God, he didn't even see it. How

typical a clueless male was he.

“What’s so damn funny?” he demanded.

“She accused you of doing exactly what you’re doing! The audacity. You crack me up.”

He blinked and then looked a little sheepish. “Okay, I get it. I’m an immature, egotistical man. The male ego is obviously a fragile creature. I think we can agree on that. Yes, it occurred to me to get a little of mine back on her by showing up with a gorgeous, stunning woman. Sue me. I even hatched the whole engagement scheme complete with the ring because I figured it was the best way to get them all off my back.”

Her shoulders shook and she closed her eyes. The man was nothing if not honest. She had to give him that much.

“Celia, look at me, please.”

His entreating tone had her turning once more to stare into those intense green eyes. He looked earnest, and he looked worried.

“I didn’t do any of this to hurt you, I swear. I thought if I just came out and asked you to do me this favor, you’d have never agreed to come with me, even with the promise of listening to your pitch.”

“So you lured me here and ambushed me instead,” she said drily.

“It didn’t go exactly as I’d planned. I’d hoped to have a nice dinner together in our suite and I was going to ask you to do me a personal favor then. I was going to outline the entire charade

and ask you to play along. Just for the time we're here. But that all went to hell when we immediately ran into my parents."

His hand crept over hers, and she didn't pull away. She should. She should already be on her way back to San Francisco, and she should be calling Brock to tell him that there was no way in hell she was delivering Evan Reese on a platter to Maddox Communications.

She pressed her lips together and tried to collect her scattered thoughts. "So you want me to pretend to be your fiancée." She lifted her hand to angle the huge diamond in the light. "Complete with a really gorgeous ring. What happens after the wedding?"

Evan shrugged. "We break up quietly later. They'll never know the difference. We don't see each other that often. One day Mom will call and I'll say 'oh, by the way, Celia and I broke things off.' And that will be that."

She shook her head. "All of this because you couldn't stand the thought of your fiancée thinking you weren't over her?"

Evan scowled. "It's not that simple. There are other factors. Besides, we've already established the fact that I'm an egotistical, immature male. We don't have to go back into that territory."

"Poor baby." She patted his arm and then laughed at his disgruntled look. "I can't believe I'm even considering this."

His eyes glinted predatorily. "But you are."

"Yes, dammit, I am. I'm a sucker for immature, egotistical males. But we need to establish a few ground rules."

"Of course," he said solemnly.

“My reputation is everything to me, Evan,” she said quietly. “I won’t have any notion of impropriety attached to this account. I won’t have it bandied around that I got the account because I slept with you.”

Something that looked an awful lot like lust gleamed in his eyes a second before he blinked and adopted a more serious expression.

“This favor is separate. If I don’t like your ideas, you’ll go home without my business. It’s that simple. Agreeing to be my fake fiancée doesn’t buy you anything but my gratitude. It won’t land you Reese Enterprises. Are we clear on that?”

“Crystal,” she said. “Tell me something, Evan. If I refuse to play the part of your lover, are you still going to hear my pitch? Are you even going to consider Maddox?”

“Well, I do have a fragile ego, remember?”

“Will you be serious?”

A grin worked at the corners of her mouth. She should be mad as hell at this man, not entertained by his self-effacing wit. And she definitely shouldn’t be attracted to his boyish charm or his straightforward handling of this entire ridiculous affair.

“I tell you what, Celia. The plan was always to have a quiet dinner in tonight where I could explain my plan and beg you to go along. Then tomorrow morning we were going to have our business meeting, again, in the privacy of our hotel suite. Afterward we would perpetuate my silly hoax on my brother and his grasping, manipulative bride-to-be. See? Completely

separate.”

“You are completely irreverent, and I’m disgusted that I like it so much.”

He smiled, and his eyes twinkled with amusement. “You’re as diabolical as I am, face it.”

“I could have used some of your evilness in the past. That’s for sure. I’m a little envious of how you don’t mind poking your finger in the eyes of those who have screwed you over. I need to learn how to do that.”

He cocked his head to the side. “What happened to you, Celia?”

She flushed and turned away. “It’s nothing. Definitely in the past and that’s where I want it to stay.”

“Okay. Fair enough. But I hope one day you’ll tell me.”

“We don’t have that kind of relationship,” she said lightly.

“No,” he murmured. “We don’t. Not yet.”

Her gaze lifted but his expression didn’t betray his thoughts. She swallowed the knot in her throat and hoped she wasn’t making a huge, huge mistake. So much could go wrong with this.

“You’re so worried about the position I’ve placed you in,” he said. “But the truth is, if I don’t like your ideas tomorrow morning, what’s to say that you don’t leave me to face the festivities on my own? I’d say that gives you all the power and none to me.”

“Or you could just say you like my ideas to keep me on the line long enough to get through the wedding,” she pointed out.

“Nothing to say that you don’t dump me the minute we get back to San Francisco.”

He nodded. “True. All of it is true. Looks like we both have some trusting to do.”

She looked down at her hand that was still underneath his. His thumb pressed into her palm, and his fingers lay still over hers, but the warmth of his touch spread up her entire arm and into her chest.

She liked this man. Genuinely liked him, stupid ambush aside. He hadn’t sugarcoated any of it. And above all else, she liked honesty. He hadn’t shied away from how the entire situation made him look. It certainly didn’t make him appear very noble, but she couldn’t get beyond thinking he was just that. Noble and honest.

The ring on her finger sparkled and glinted in the light. For just one moment, she allowed herself to imagine what it would be like if it were all real. Two seconds later she mentally slapped herself silly and told herself to get over her foolishness.

She had a job to do. She had to impress this man with her brains and her creativity, her drive and her determination. She could do all that. And if it meant she had to go beyond the call of duty to do a personal favor for him, then she needed to suck it up and just get the job done. Too many people were counting on her.

It was silly. She felt like an idiot and she was sure Evan didn’t feel any better, but it wasn’t up to her to question his motives. For whatever reason, he didn’t want his brother and his fiancée to see him bleed. She could understand that. She would have died

rather than let her old boss and his scheming wife know how much they'd destroyed her.

"All right, Evan. I'll do it."

Triumph mixed with relief flared to life in his eyes.

"Thank you for not bashing my skull in and leaving, but more than that, thank you for not reacting in front of my family. It was more than I deserved given how I sprang it on you. I swear, that was not the way I wanted to approach you with my proposition."

"If we're done with all that, can we eat? I'm starving. You can tell me all I need to know about your family and also tell me how it was we met and when you proposed, but not until I get something to eat."

He leaned forward, caught her jaw in his hand and turned her toward him. Their lips were so close that his breath blew warm over her mouth. She swallowed nervously, wondering if he would kiss her. And then she wondered if she'd let him. Or if she would kiss him instead.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Slowly, he withdrew, and to her chagrin, disappointment washed over her.

Seven

Evan watched as Celia sat sideways on the couch, her back against the arm and her knees doubled in front of her. She looked comfortable and completely relaxed, which was more than he could have hoped for given how stupidly he'd sprung the whole engagement thing on her.

After her initial fury, though, she'd calmed down and had taken it well. Damn, but he liked this woman. Oh, he was definitely attracted to her sexually, but beyond that, he genuinely liked spending time with her.

If he was smart, he'd take that as a huge warning sign to stay away and not become involved, but he'd never claimed brilliance.

She'd changed into nothing more glamorous than a pair of sweatpants and a San Francisco Tide jersey. Odd, but she hadn't struck him as a baseball fan.

Her shoes had long since been shed, and her toenails, painted a delicate shade of pink, teased him. Hell, he was even attracted to her feet. Small and dainty.

He was officially losing his mind. Never before had he lusted after a woman's feet.

She forked another bite into her mouth then sighed and made a low sound of agony before putting her plate down on the coffee table.

"That was fabulous. I've eaten so much that I won't fit into

that sparkly dress I brought for the wedding.”

That statement brought a whole host of splendid ideas to mind. Namely that they could both skip the wedding and stay in bed where clothing was entirely optional.

He shifted in his seat and wondered for the sixth time why he was so bent on torturing himself.

“So tell me something, Evan,” she said as she leaned farther into the sofa cushions. Her eyelids lowered and she tucked those pink toes underneath a throw pillow. “What made you walk away from your family’s business and start your own in a field that was so different from the jewelry trade?”

It didn’t surprise him that she knew so much about his background. She would have researched him tirelessly. Still, he debated how much to tell her.

Their gazes locked, and he saw only simple curiosity. No ulterior motive, just interest.

“There were several reasons,” he finally said. “Emotion has no place in business and yet I find myself making emotional decisions.”

Her eyebrows rose. “I’m surprised you’d admit that. Doesn’t jive with your big, bad, ruthless businessman persona.”

He smiled ruefully. “Okay, so part of it was emotion based. I didn’t agree with my father’s style of management. The fact is his company is in trouble. I saw it coming years ago and he was in flat denial. He saw no reason to change the way he ran things since it had worked for decades before.

“The other reason was I don’t exactly get along that well with him and Mitchell.”

“You don’t say,” she said drily.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I know, hard to believe. Mitchell... there are lots of more appropriate words for him, but I’ll go with the fact that he’s a lazy, unmotivated brown noser. All his life, because he was the baby, he’s never had to actually work for anything. He’s been handed everything since he was a child. As a result, his sense of entitlement is huge. I would work for something and he would want what I had worked for. Dad would give it to him.”

“Ah, I think I’m beginning to understand the fiancée thing more now.”

He nodded. “Yes, I don’t harbor any illusion that Mitchell and Bettina are some great love match. I had Bettina, so Mitchell decided he wanted her. Bettina saw Mitchell’s appointment to CEO as her ride into a life of glamour.”

“And were you and Bettina? A love match, I mean?” she asked gently.

He pursed his lips and blew out a long breath. “This is where I look like the jerk.”

Celia chuckled. “Jerk? You? Surely you jest.”

“All right, don’t rub it in,” he grumbled. “I’ve admitted my shortcomings.”

“Do continue. I’m dying to hear all about what a toad you are.”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief and amusement. He’d never

wanted to kiss her more than he did right now. Instead he found himself telling her stuff he'd never tell a woman he planned to take to bed.

"Bettina didn't pose a challenge. That sounds bad but when I met her, I was devoting all my time to making my business a success. It was exciting and exhilarating. I exceeded even my wildest expectations. Everything was falling into place at the speed of light. All that was missing in my mind to complete the image of perfection I had built up was a wife and a family. Perfect house in the suburbs. I'd come home after a hectic day and she'd have dinner waiting. The kids would all be bathed and well behaved. Even the dog would be the epitome of good behavior. I wanted—still want—a woman who'll put me first."

Celia snorted, covered her mouth and then dissolved into hoots of laughter.

He regarded her dubiously. "I do believe you're mocking me."

"Mocking you?" She wheezed between words and tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. "Oh my, Evan. You do dream big, don't you?"

"Well, it was a good fantasy while it lasted," he grumbled. "I looked around and there was Bettina. I didn't have time to figure out what my ideal woman was. I wanted my perfect life then and I didn't want to wait. So I asked her to marry me, she said yes, I gave her a ring and that was that."

"And yet here you are. With me. The fake fiancée."

He scowled ferociously at her only for her to dissolve into

laughter again.

“Okay, so what happened? Other than Mitchell stepping in and being an overindulged twit.”

He liked this woman. She was good for his ego even when she was tearing it down.

“Bettina wanted to set an immediate date. She had a grand wedding planned. Even had the honeymoon destination picked out. She littered my office with brochures. Hell, she even had our children’s names picked out.”

“I would have thought given your fantasy that you would have eaten that up with a spoon,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, so did I. Only I found myself backing off. I kept making excuses to extend the engagement. I was busy. This deal had to take priority. That deal needed immediate attention. Before I knew it, we had been engaged a year with a wedding scheduled another year beyond that. And moreover I was content with that.”

“Did you never love her?” Celia asked quietly.

“No. No, I didn’t. Which is why I can’t really blame her for wanting out. Our marriage would have been a disaster just as soon as I figured out the reality didn’t live up to the fantasy I’d created in my mind. I just didn’t think she’d dump me for Mitchell or that Mitchell would have been poaching on my territory.”

Celia winced. “Yeah, I can understand that.”

“I found them in bed, you know. How clichéd is that? The sad

thing is, when I found them together in my bed, I just laughed, because to me it was just the next step in an already farcical relationship. I tossed them out of my apartment and washed my hands of them both.”

Celia’s expression grew thoughtful. “Hmm, so you don’t necessarily object to the fact that she found someone else. Or that she cheated on you. Just who she indulged herself with.”

Evan nodded and rubbed the back of his neck to ease some of the tension and fatigue. Just talking about it raised his ire all over again.

“Yeah, it’s stupid I know. I mean, she could have cheated on me with my business partner, or my vice president or, hell, even my driver. I wouldn’t have cared. I might have even given the man a raise. But my brother. My spoiled, overindulged brother. No, that was the one thing I couldn’t forgive.”

“Well, if their relationship is based on all you say, then I’d imagine they’ll suffer enough in the long run without you wishing them ill.”

He regarded her for a long moment. “You’re not going to lecture me about harboring childish grudges?”

She smiled, and those gorgeous green eyes cut right through him. She took his breath away until he was helpless to do anything but stare back.

“Nope. Not a word. Considering I have my own grudges and I don’t plan on forgetting them in this lifetime, I could hardly chastise you for the same.”

“Oh, do tell. You sound so ... vicious. I like it,” he teased.

Her expression grew serious. Pain flickered in her eyes, and she turned away, her mouth drawn into a tight line. He was immediately sorry that the light mood had dissolved. As much as he wanted to know her secrets, he wanted to see her laughing and smiling even more.

To cover the sudden heaviness in the air, he got up to pour a glass of wine. Without a word, he offered one to her, and she took it, gratitude easing some of the tightness around her eyes.

He wanted to touch her so badly. Wanted to ease the strain and the unhappy tilt to her lips. He wanted to kiss her plump mouth until he owned her very breath.

He forced himself to return to his chair. The remains of their dinner was scattered across the coffee table. Some had fallen to the floor, but he wasn't inclined to clean it up. They sat there sipping their wine as evening fell all around them.

Finally he could remain silent no more.

He leaned forward to set his glass on the table. For a moment he looked down at his hands and imagined her flesh beneath his fingertips. Then he glanced back up to see her studying him with the same keen interest flashing in her eyes. She wasn't immune. He wasn't the only one who felt the magnetic pull between them.

“What are we going to do, Celia?” he murmured.

He saw her swallow nervously. She hadn't misunderstood, but neither did she respond.

“I want you so damn much I hurt. I've hurt for weeks. Every

time I look at you, I get so many knots that I can't function. I've thought of all the ways I can explain to you that our business relationship has nothing to do with the desire I feel for you. But the simple truth is I don't give a damn. I want you in my bed, and I don't care what has to be done to make that happen."

Her eyes went wide and frightened. He hated that. He didn't want her to be afraid of him.

"You feel it, too. Don't deny me that much."

Slowly she nodded. Her fingers went to her forehead and she dug them into her hair. Still, he could see them shaking, and she swallowed again, her slim neck working with the effort.

"Please," she whispered. "I can't do this, Evan. It's the one thing I can't do. Don't ask it of me. If you want me to admit it, fine. I want you. More than I've ever wanted another man."

Savage satisfaction gripped him. Didn't just grip him but lunged for him and wrapped a hand around his throat and his groin. His entire body reacted to that simple statement. She wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anyone else.

She turned on the couch until she faced forward and her feet met the floor. She looked in turns miserable and scared. Her eyes closed in what looked to him like self-condemnation. He swore, startling her with the force of his curses.

"Whatever you're thinking, I don't like it," he said flatly. "I have no idea what the hell kind of blame you're placing on yourself, but I can guarantee that you didn't use your feminine wiles to seduce me into signing with your agency. I wanted you

from the first moment I saw you. Want to know when that was, Celia? Go ahead, ask me.”

He stared at her in blatant challenge, waiting, wanting her to take it up.

Her eyes went wide with shock, and her face was pale and drawn. “W-when?”

“At the Sutherland’s reception. You were there with one of your clients. Copeland, if I remember correctly. The grocery-store giant.”

Her mouth fell open. “But you were still with Rencom.”

He nodded. “Precisely. I looked across the room, and you took my breath away. Want to know another of my sins, Celia? I was still engaged to Bettina. It was a week before I found her in bed with Mitchell. I didn’t care. I wanted you so much. Now tell me how big of a bastard that makes me. Try to tell me this has anything to do with your pitch.”

In the course of their conversation, he’d moved to the couch. He moved closer still, stalking her like prey. Her scent lured him, and he inhaled the delicate, feminine smell that he’d come to associate with only her.

Her eyes were flush with awareness and caution. There was confusion in her deep green pools, but something else, too. Desire. Matching desire. She wanted him. Maybe as much as he wanted her. It didn’t matter because he would have her.

“Want to know something else?” he murmured. “I almost didn’t consider Maddox for the account. Want to know why?”

Because I didn't want it to interfere with my pursuit of you."

He was close now. So close he could feel every little puff of breath that came from her lips. He could see the tiny little nervous swallows that worked her throat up and down. And her mouth. Her luscious, sweet mouth. He wanted to taste it, devour it like candy.

"W-what changed your mind?" she whispered.

"I'm perfectly capable of separating business from pleasure," he said evenly.

"Evan, we can't."

She put her hand on his chest. Big mistake. A current of electricity singed him. They both jumped, but before she could withdraw, he caught her fingers and trapped her hand between his and his chest.

"Just one kiss, Celia. Just one. I have to kiss you. It's all I'll demand for now. I can wait for more until we have this account settled."

Without waiting her consent, he swept his mouth over hers. Finally. Her sweetness exploded onto his tongue the moment he licked over her lips. Her mouth parted in a gasp, and he took full advantage, delving deep into her moist heat.

She made the sweetest sounds. He swallowed them up as he devoured every inch of her mouth. He was transfixed by her full bottom lip. He nipped lightly at it, teasing it to fullness and then he sucked it between his teeth.

Her tongue stroked tentatively over his, just light brushes with

the tip and then she grew bolder, taking a more active part in the kiss.

His hands delved into her hair. He loved her hair. Long and glorious, the color like a russet sunset over the desert. The temptation was too great. He'd fantasized about it for too long.

He fumbled with the clip and released its hold on her hair. It tumbled down her back, over his hands like a wave. He gathered the strands between his fingers, mesmerized by their silky smoothness.

He drank deeply, not wanting the moment to end. He could spend hours kissing her, but he wanted more. He wanted to work his mouth down the curve of her jaw to her neck. He wanted to peel every layer of clothing from her body and then run his tongue over her soft skin.

He wondered what her breasts would feel like in his hands and what her nipples would taste like, how they'd feel as he sucked them into his mouth.

Oh, yes, he'd spent a lot of time wondering about her breasts. She never wore clothing that could be deemed too provocative. She was fashionable, yes, but he secretly wished she'd wear something a little more revealing. It was killing him not to get a hint of her full, ripe breasts.

Soon. Soon, he'd unwrap all of her. He'd possess her. She'd be his.

He needed air and he broke away only long enough to pull oxygen into his starving lungs. She gasped along with him, and

then he started at the corner of her mouth and licked and kissed his way across to the other corner.

Her small hands slid up his chest. It was like a heating element sliding over his skin. She left a blazing trail of fierce need in her wake. His entire body came alive, and all she'd done was touch him. Innocently.

They wound up around his neck and then her fingertips just delved into the hair at his nape. He shuddered, and it was all he could do to retain his tight hold on his control.

His body screamed at him to haul her over his shoulder and drag her caveman-style to the bedroom. He'd rip off her clothes and spend the night taking her over and over until they both succumbed to exhaustion.

His mind yelled at him to be careful. To take it slow. Not to push her so far away that she never returned.

It was that fear of driving her away permanently that finally pulled him back from the brink of insanity.

With great reluctance, he pulled back. His hands were still tangled up in her hair, and he carefully extricated them from the heavy coil that lay over her shoulders.

Her eyes were cloudy, a gorgeous mix of confusion and desire that had him wanting to throw caution to the wind and continue his seduction.

"That," he whispered, "is what I've been wanting to do ever since I saw you across a crowded room six months ago. Now you tell me this has anything to do with Maddox Communications

and Reese Enterprises.”

Her hand fluttered to her mouth and she stared at him with shocked awareness.

“Oh, God, Evan. What are we going to do?”

He smiled gently and slowly pulled her hand away from her swollen lips.

“What we’re going to do is get your pitch out of the way tomorrow morning. Whatever happens afterward, we take it as it comes.”

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