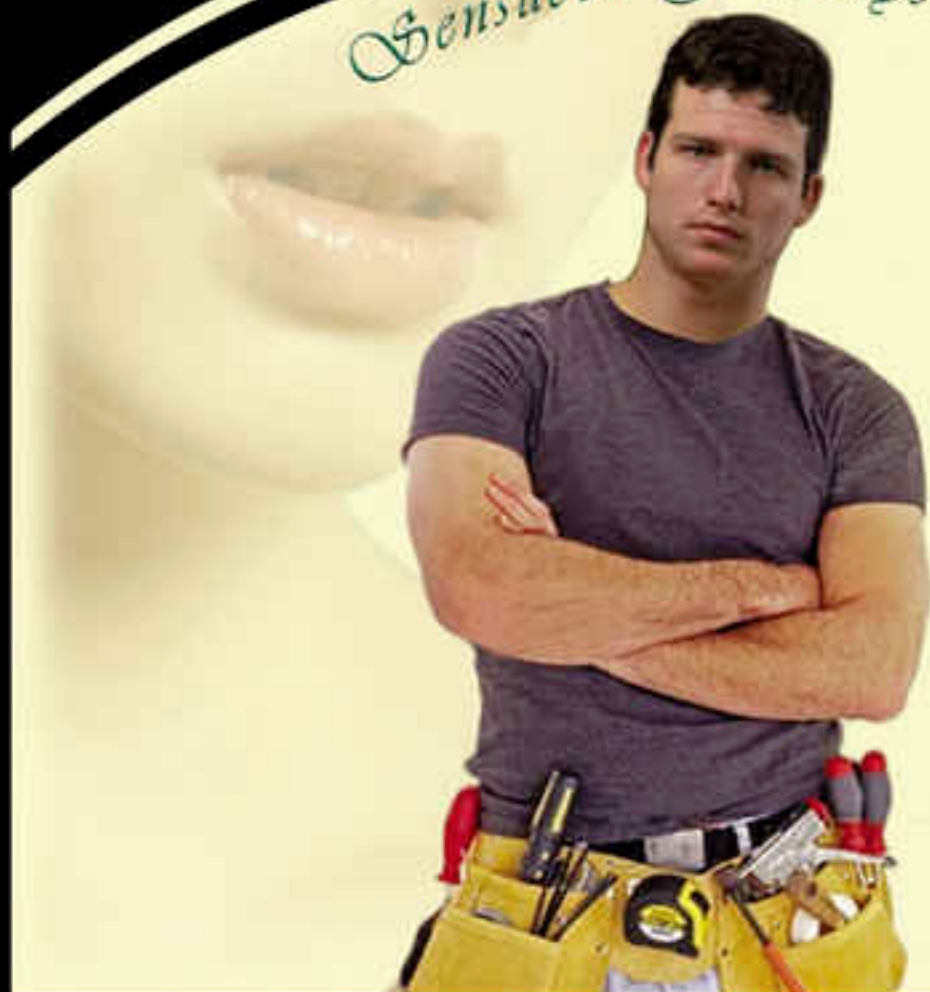


Black Velvet Seductions

Sensuous Journeys



Studs for Hire:

Woman on Top

Sherry James

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Black Velvet Seductions Publishing Company

www.blackvelvetseductions.com

Copyright ©2006 by Sherry Siwinski

First published in 2006, 2006

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

ISBN 0-9774682-7-5

Copyright 2006 Sherry Siwinski

Cover Art Copyright 2006 by Kara Elsberry

karasdesigns@aol.com—

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

All characters in this book are completely fictional. They exist only in the imagination of the author. Any similarity to any actual person or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Published 2006

Printed by Black Velvet Seductions Publishing Company in the United States of America—

Visit us at:

www.blackvelvetseductions.com

Dedication

For Mike, my amazing husband and friend. Thanks for sticking by me all these years and cooking a meal or two along the way, for wrangling the kids, and most important, keeping the faith while I pursued my dream. You're the best!

And for two people who are near and dear to my heart—Eugene and Nadene Budde. You've always encouraged and supported me. Thanks for being a great Mom and Dad.

Acknowledgment

Writing is one of those things that even though it's pretty solitary, most of the writers I know don't totally, go it alone—including me. There is always someone along the way who makes a difference in our life that directly reflects our writing career in one form or another. Whether it's a simple piece of advice, a critique of a manuscript, a catch of a misplaced comma, a shoulder to cry on after yet, another rejection, or great pals to celebrate a sale with, having that support along the way is invaluable. I've had the privilege to be touched by many people along the rocky road to publication and most belong to my writers' group, the small but mighty, Prairieland Romance Writers. Thanks for all your help and support over the years. You gals are the best! And a special thanks goes to my ace critique partner, Julie Miller. Thanks for all the hours filled with laughter, M & M's, popcorn, and just for being there. You rock, Julie!

CHAPTER ONE

"Sydnie, your two o'clock is here," Casey said as she entered her partner's newly decorated office. "And whoa, is he hot! He's just what we've been looking for."

"I hope you're right. His resume certainly is impressive," Sydnie Riley said as she glanced over Allen Bosch's list of carpentry skills one more time.

"To heck with his resume." Casey sat on the edge of the antique oak desk. "All this guy has to do is show up at my place in nothing but a tool belt and I'd be a satisfied customer."

"That nice, huh?" Syd glanced up at her friend and smiled.

"Nice? Nice doesn't begin to describe this guy. One look at him and I knew I'd found my fantasy bad boy. I wonder if he owns a Harley."

Syd shook her head in amusement. Leave it to Casey to check the guy out in full detail in two seconds flat. "Well, show him in. We've got a long list of interviewees this afternoon. I'd like to get some men hired as soon as possible. Jobs are beginning to stack up on the waiting list."

"Did I tell you how smart you are, Syd?" Casey said as she studied her red polished fingernails.

"Yeah, about a dozen times." Syd laughed. The two women were not only business partners, but best friends. Along with their other good friend Terri Alberry, the three always shared their hopes, dreams, and drowned their man sorrows together in lite beer and chocolate chip cookies. Throw in an occasional

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

gallon bucket of strawberry swirl ice cream, and all heartaches were forgotten. At least temporarily.

It was only natural the trio would join forces when they'd all had enough of the power suit, pantyhose world that was still, in their opinions, dominated by a slew of arrogant, egotistical, male chauvinists.

"Creating this contracting agency was ingenious. I wish I'd thought of it." Casey flipped her long blond hair over her shoulder. "I mean, once word gets around, not a single woman in Omaha is going to call the competition when she can have her sink unclogged, or her outlet rewired, by a handsome hunk from Studs for Hire. We're going to be rich."

"Don't start counting the George Washingtons just yet. We'll have a lot of expenses along the way, and payroll will be the biggest."

"Yes, I know. I am our accountant, remember?" Casey plucked a candy cinnamon stick from the jar on Sydnie's desk. "But being surrounded by men who rival Adonis while we wait for the money to roll in is my idea of heaven. All we need now is to keep an endless supply of t-bones, wine and chocolate stocked in the fridge."

"Sounds delicious," Syd cooed. She rose from her chair and pulled a file from beneath Casey's designer jean clad bottom. "But unless you show in our first choice cut-of-the-day, we'll never be able to afford anything more than an occasional mushroom burger."

"Say no more. I love a good steak almost as much as a night of sultry sex." Casey hopped off the desk and sighed.

"But if I can't have the sex, by damn I'm going to at least have the steak."

Pathetic. That's what this whole situation was. Three grown women settling for corn-fed Nebraska beef in lieu of steamy sex. Sydnie shook her head. Life was filled with so many injustices.

She gathered a stack of papers from the top of her desk and turned toward the file cabinet.

Filing. She hated it. As soon as they could afford it, she'd hire an office girl for this stuff. Or better yet, an office stud. A cute, sweet guy with eyes as blue as the heartland sky outside of the Omaha city limits would suit her fine. She'd watch for a possible candidate in the pile of applications they'd received so far.

"Hello, Syd," a deep voice drawled.

Sydnie's hand stilled above the long row of manila folders in the top drawer of the file cabinet. Her breath caught in her throat.

She knew that voice. Knew it all too well.

But what would Trevor Vanden Bosch be doing here? Didn't he get enough gloating in before she was practically forced to crawl away from the advertising firm over a month ago?

Rounding up her courage, she turned to face the man who'd helped rip her career dreams out from beneath her like a zero to sixty in two-point-six-seconds sports car.

He leaned against the door jamb and folded his arms across his broad chest. Standing there in a pair of jeans and a snug fitting black T-shirt, the man who'd caused her to

devour two quarts of Rocky Road in one sitting, was more handsome then ever.

"What are you doing here?" she managed to ask around a lump in her throat.

"I'm here about a job."

"I don't need an advertising rep, Vanden Bosch. Contrary to what you might think I'm quite capable of coming up with my own ad campaigns." She slammed the file drawer shut. "Now if you'll please leave, I have a two o'clock appointment waiting."

"I'm not here about advertising, Syd." He shoved away from the door and moved deeper into the room.

"Then what are you here for?" She arched a brow, ready to battle with this guy if necessary. "Gloating is so unbecoming. Didn't your mother teach you that?"

"I told you. I'm here about a job. Specifically," he said as he pulled a folded newspaper from his back pocket and pointed to a classified ad circled in bright red, "a position as a carpenter."

A burst of sarcastic laughter escaped Sydnie's throat. His audacity dredged up memories she'd spent the last thirty days trying to forget with frequent, expensive, trips to the nearest day spa.

Who did he think he was coming in here like this? Well, he was on her turf now. And there was no way she'd let any man mow over her again.

"I don't have time for your B.S., Vanden Bosch. I have someone waiting."

"I'm your two o'clock."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"Not unless you've changed your name to..." She picked up the resume. "Allen Bosch..." her voice withered.

"At your service." A Mel Gibson-like grin tugged at one corner of his mouth.

She'd been duped. A new surge of anger hit her full force. "Get out," she said coldly.

"Now, is that anyway to treat an old friend?" he asked as he rounded the desk and stopped in front of her. The furniture she'd picked out with such care at Ethan Allen's shrank in his presence.

How could it be he seemed taller than she remembered? It must be his boots. The soles of rugged work boots were thicker than the dress shoes he normally wore. And those thousand dollar suits he'd prided himself on had nothing on the snug fitting pair of jeans he wore now. Along with a shadow of a beard dusting his jaw, this side of Trevor exuded a maverick sexuality she'd never seen before.

Casey was right. Trevor was damn hot. A warm flush prickled Sydnie's neck as she realized she'd been sizing him up.

"You're not my friend. Now get out," she said bitterly. Angry with herself for allowing Trevor to affect her senses, Sydnie knew she needed to get rid of him before she did something stupid like the last time they were together. Normally she didn't throw herself at men, but Trevor had a way of bringing her wild side to the surface. She'd thrown caution to the wind before and had dearly paid the price for such foolishness.

She wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"Look. I knew you wouldn't see me unless I used some kind of alias—"

"Trevor Allen Vanden Bosch. Of course." She cringed, wondering again how she could have let herself be fooled so easily.

"The one and only."

"Well, *Allen*." She placed her hands on her hips and faced him with her full five feet, six inch frame. "This interview is over. I'm afraid the position you're applying for has been filled."

"That's not what your lovely partner told me. In fact, she seemed certain I'd be the right man for the job." He smiled and that infamous dimple on his left cheek didn't disappoint. She had to admit that dimple was one of the things about him she'd never forget. Well, and then there was his coffee brown hair with that stubborn lock that always dropped over his forehead in a rakish way. And too, there was the way his toned muscles strained at the fabric of his shirts. In a business suit he always looked like the ultimate professional.

But today ... ?

Today he looked every bit the bad boy Casey fantasized about.

"Are you ... licensed?" she asked, searching for a reason to get her mind back on track, and hopefully make him leave. "I didn't see anything on your resume about a license, but then, since you lied to me to land an interview, I'll assume this long list of credentials is all a fabrication, too."

"I didn't lie to you. I just twisted my name a little."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"A little?" She tossed his file onto her desk and crossed her arms, firmly putting up her defenses. "You purposefully misled me."

"Come on, Syd. I'm qualified for the job. Just give me a chance to prove it." He stepped closer. The air in the room thickened around them. Trevor ran the pad of his thumb along Sydnie's jaw and her heart skidded to a halt.

Oh, boy. They were careening into the dangerous, no return zone. She needed a serious reality check.

"You're as hot and sexy as ever, Syd," he said smoothly.

That did it. Time to beat him at his own game. "Yeah? Tell me more, handsome," she whispered and brushed her lips against his, teasing him unmercifully. No doubt he thought he could make her fall at his feet and forget all about everything that had, and hadn't, happened between them. And truthfully, the touch of his lips against her own just now, almost made her forget.

Big mistake. Big, big mistake.

"Save your charms for some other poor damsel," she said huskily. Sydnie jerked away and steeled her resolve to keep at least a yardstick's length of distance between them at all times. She had every reason in the world to despise this man. She'd best not forget it.

"Besides, why should I hire you?" she asked. "You've got a job already. And don't tell me eighty-thousand a year isn't enough to keep you living in high style in Omaha and you need a second income."

"Let's just say I'm looking for a new challenge in life." He winked.

And he thought she was going to be that challenge? Wrong. Damn the man. He looked as cool and confident as usual.

"Ha! The only challenge you'll find here is if you can get through the door before the knob hits you in the as—"

"Come on, Syd. Give me a break."

"Look. I don't know why you're here, or what you're up to, but whatever the reason, it's no good. Now save me the trouble of firing you later on, and leave."

"Dammit, Syd. I need a job," he said with a flat tone.

"Oh?" She crossed her arms. "If you're really desperate, I hear the Roller Hop drive-in is hiring." She couldn't stop the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Roller skates and a chartreuse miniskirt would look fabulous on you, too."

"Syd. I'm serious. I need a job." He brushed an unruly curl from her face. The temperature in the room soared from his touch. The chambray shirt she'd put on over her crop-top to ward off the early morning chill now felt like a suffocating wool blanket.

"How dare you come in here like this! I'm in no mood for your games. I had enough of the carnal promotional ladder at the world renowned Smythe and Jones Ad Agency." She spun around, not allowing herself to look into those dark-brown lady-killer eyes of his. The man could be so infuriating at times. Sexy, but infuriating.

"All right." He took a deep breath and raked his fingers through his hair. "I got ... fired."

Fired? Trevor? Now that would be something to celebrate, provided, of course, it were true. "I don't believe you."

"Damn, you're as stubborn as ever." He rolled his eyes. "Believe it, Syd. I'm on the street."

"Ah, what happened? The big wigs at the Smythe and Jones decided you weren't worth that fancy promotion, after all?" Sydnie couldn't help feeling a tinge of satisfaction.

"It doesn't matter," he shrugged. He sat on the edge of the desk and picked up the decorative smoke-colored bottle Sydnie had placed next to her page-a-day woman's empowerment calendar.

"So why did you come here for a job? Why not go to another agency? We're just starting out. I can assure you the pay is better elsewhere." She studied him with skepticism.

"I've always had a knack for working with wood. And when I heard about your little business venture, it sounded like a great opportunity to do something I'd actually enjoy for a change."

"Really? And you expect me to buy this story? For some reason I can't picture you taking a seventy-thousand dollar pay cut."

"You don't know me very well, Syd." The expression covering his face was as serious as a two-dollar bill, and to her disgust, she wanted to believe him.

Yeah, maybe she didn't know him very well. But then, maybe she did. *A little too well.* And that intimate knowledge, combined with Sydnie's instincts, told her Trevor was up to something. He preferred his affluent lifestyle too much to simply walk away from it because he needed a change.

"Just give me a job," he continued. I've got a car payment to make. Hey." He pulled the glass-topped cork out of the

bottle. "This looks like Jeannie's bottle except it doesn't have all the decorative painting on it." He peered down the throat of the bottle. "There's no couch inside. What a bummer."

Syd grabbed the bottle from him, replaced the topper, and set it firmly back in its place on the desk. "So trade off the Lexus and get a Duster like other down-on-their-luck souls."

"It's nice to see you haven't lost your sense of humor," he chided. "So. What's it going to take to get you to hire me?" He gazed at her with a smoldering intensity that could melt the knees of a marble statue.

He stepped forward with the grace of a black panther moving in for the kill. Standing this close, Sydnie could smell the subtle scent of his musky cologne. She took a deep breath, allowing herself a mere second of pleasure.

But now wasn't the time to let this man disintegrate her resolve. He'd shrugged off her advances before and made a fool of her in front of her colleagues. She wouldn't allow it to happen again.

Besides, she had a business to run. No matter what, she couldn't lose sight of that fact.

"I'll have to think about it. Give me a few weeks and I'll contact you." She gave him her sexiest smile before turning her back on him, silently dismissing him.

"Weeks? Ah, come on, Syd. I can't wait weeks," he drawled. Trevor leaned casually against the file cabinet and presented her with a look that suggested he wasn't just talking about a job, either. Well, he'd be waiting until the North Pole moved South before she let him love her and leave her. She took a deep breath and decided the best course of

action to take was simply to ignore him. She busied herself by searching for a file—any file.

Of course, she did relish the prospect of making him sweat. And there would be plenty of time to make Trevor Vanden Bosch sweat under her thumb if she gave him the job and she was his boss this time. The idea posed major possibilities.

"Don't make me beg," he said. "I do have my pride."

Was that exasperation she heard in his voice? A grinch-like grin spread across her lips and she faced him. "Oh, but it's so much fun to watch a man beg for a change. And I'm afraid if you really want to work here, you're going to have to do some serious begging. I've got more than a hundred applications of highly qualified candidates piled on my desk."

"All right," Trevor said, dropping to his knees. "You've got your wish. I'm begging, Syd." His lips were level with the fly of her Levi's. He glanced up at her. Desire flamed to life in his eyes. Hot tingles raced through her veins. She swallowed hard.

Now who was making who sweat?

Remember what this guy did to you. This could be your chance to get even.

"All right." She stepped away for her sanity's sake. The cool metal of the file cabinet pressed into her back, clashing with the heat of her skin. "You want a job so bad. You've got it."

"Great." Trevor got to his feet. "My tools are in the truck. I can start—"

"Under one condition."

"And that is?"

"This is my company. What I say, goes. Under no circumstances whatsoever shall you question me or my partners' authority or orders. Is that clear?"

"Sure, Syd. Whatever you say. Where do you need me to go first?"

Sydnie's gut clenched, certain she'd made one serious mistake here. Trevor was being far too agreeable. Either he was working on the sly, or he'd had an out-of-body experience and was now an alien. She sure as hell hoped she didn't wake up in the morning to regret this scheme like one of her sudden, stupid urges to do a color-at-home job on her hair.

"Let's find out," she said as she led the way out of her office and to a desk in the lobby. Terri, her other partner, sat inputting data into the computer. "Terri, we've got ourselves a carpenter."

The brunette glanced up from the computer screen and gazed at Trevor over the top of her half-glasses. Her mouth dropped open. She snatched off her glasses and tossed them into a creeping philodendron adorning one corner of her desk.

Trevor gave Terri one of his devilish smiles. She stood, sending her chair racing backward across the floor mat.

"Oops," she said as she grabbed the chair and wheeled it back up to the desk.

"Are you all right?" Trevor asked with concern in his voice.

"I'm fine." She gave him a weak smile.

"Name's Trevor Vanden Bosch." He offered her a hand. Terri wiped her palms down the length of her jeans before accepting his gesture.

"Welcome to Studs for Hire, Trevor," Terri said warmly.

"Call me Trev."

She licked her lips. "What a nice name. I had a rabbit named Trevor once."

"Had?" Trevor quirked a brow. He let go of her hand and propped one lean hip on the edge of Terri's cluttered desk. Syd couldn't help but notice the way his rigid muscles strained against his tan skin. And there was no way any male-hungry female could miss them, either.

"He passed away," Terri continued.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh, it's okay. I knew it was coming."

"Had he been sick?"

"Well, yeah. He got ear mites from my neighbor lady's cat, and I didn't figure out what was wrong until his equilibrium was off. By then it was too late," she said with a soft sniff.

"That's a tough break."

"Yeah, it was. But, I've had lots of animals over the years and—"

"Terri," Syd said firmly, interrupting Trevor's charming session. He hadn't changed one bit when it came to enticing a woman into his harem. Trevor's uncanny knack of making a woman reveal her life history within seconds of their first meeting, was his clever way of sneaking under her skin. And when he did, look out. A woman quickly lost all common sense and fell into his lap, begging for more. "Do we have any

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

pressing jobs we need a carpenter for? Mr. Vanden Bosch is anxious to get started."

"Ah, sure. We've got a few," Terri said, still distracted. Syd frowned at the puppy dog look of longing on her friend's face. Great. Just great. Terri was drooling over the man like a bloodhound over a simulated beef treat.

Enough. Syd snatched the waiting list from the desk and scanned the dozen or so names on the paper. She wasn't going to send Mr. This Old House out on just any job. No, his first job had to be the perfect job.

* * * *

Trevor's cell phone chirped as he negotiated the truck through heavy traffic on Dodge Street. "Vanden Bosch," he answered.

"Did you get it?" a deep voice asked anxiously from the other end of the line.

"Yeah. No problem."

"I got to hand it to you, Trev. You're a smooth one. I thought for sure she'd tell you to go to hell before you could set a foot in her office."

"Nah. Not sweet, sexy Syd," he said with a cockiness he didn't feel.

"Hmph. Don't try to bullshit me. I know damn good and well she put up some kind of fight. Now tell me the truth. I know our lovely Ms. Riley is a scrappin' little kitty."

Trevor gritted his teeth at the suggestive remark. He'd love nothing more than to tell Smythe where to go, but now was not the time. He had to concentrate on negotiating the

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

extended cab pickup around the corner onto Happy Hollow Boulevard. "All right. So she was a little reluctant at first. But all that matters is I won her over and I'm in."

"So where are you now?"

"I'm headed for the Happy Hollow Country Club area."

"What are you doing in the old money part of town?"

"I've got my first job assignment."

"I'll be damned. So this Studs for Hire business of hers is already catering to the old and rich, eh?"

Trevor realized he'd reached the Country Club Avenue intersection and slowed the no-muffler truck to a stop. He scanned the house numbers adorning the classic brick and stone homes. Some of them were so large they could easily be labeled mansions. He'd been in several of them over the last few years attending dinner parties. But he had to admit, it felt kind of strange driving among some of Omaha's elite set in an orange 1975 Dodge pickup truck.

He spotted the house he searched for and pulled into the arborvitae-lined driveway and cut the engine. The truck belched and sputtered before finally dying completely.

"Look. I'm where I need to be. I better get up to the front door before someone calls the cops on me."

"Why would anyone call the police?"

"This orange bomb I'm driving isn't exactly the automobile of choice among Happy Hollow residents."

"Oh, that. Well, just don't forget who you're really working for here, Vanden Bosch. Remember I'm counting on you to get the information we need. And as I said, there will be a

nice perk waiting for you at the end of the deal if you pull this off. I don't have to remind you what's at stake here."

"Don't worry. I'll handle it. I'll get the information we're after."

"That's what I like to hear. I'll check in with you later." The line went dead.

Trevor pushed the cracked white vinyl sun visor back in place. He glanced around the truck's interior. This thing really was rough. It probably should have been retired to the junk yard years ago. But Smythe was insistent upon creating a down-on-your-luck image even though Trevor had argued this was a little extreme.

He picked up the work order Syd had given him and scanned down to the middle of the page where it instructed what exactly he was going to be doing for a Mrs. Reginald Whitcomb.

"Doggie door?" Trevor gazed up at the three story classical style home. "This woman lives like a queen and all she wants is a doggie door?" Trevor couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. He really did enjoy working with wood, and he was hoping this first job would be something he could do to impress Syd. He scanned the work order again and sure enough, all it said was install doggie door.

"This will be easy," he mumbled as he opened the truck door. The metal hinges creaked in agony. The door clunked shut and he eyed the pickup with disgust and embarrassment for his new mode of transportation. How the hell was he supposed to convey this stud image if he was driving a wreck? Maybe he could get Smythe to rethink this and

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

convince him to get a new Dodge instead. He'd mention it later, but right now he had a doggie door to install.

This little job shouldn't take more than half an hour and then he'd get back to where he needed to be.

Bewitching Sydney.

CHAPTER TWO

"Fabio doesn't like to have to lift his legs very high," Mrs. Reginald Whitcomb said.

Trevor stared at the eccentric woman and the buff colored toy poodle she held as if they'd both grown three heads. She looked as though she'd just stepped off the set of Green Acres. Here it was after three in the afternoon and she wore a filmy pastel green evening gown. Her silvery-blond hair was piled high atop her head in a style that went out decades ago, and she wore rings that must have weighed a ton. The only difference between Ms. Reginald Whitcomb and Lisa Douglas was, Lisa Douglas was nice. This woman wasn't.

The poodle growled and shook in the lady's arms as if he were freezing. Fabio's big as marbles brown eyes looked as though they never stopped watering. Maybe the dog had allergies.

"Excuse me?" Trevor managed to say without sounding like a complete idiot.

"I said, be careful not to put the doggie door too high. Fabio doesn't like to lift his legs. If you install it too high, he won't use the door to go out to his play yard. He's very sensitive, you know. I don't want to do anything to crush his delicate disposition."

Play yard? What did a manic-depressive poodle the size of a doughnut box need a play yard for? But, that wasn't for Trevor to debate. He was here to do a job. And he had to do this right if he wanted to get in good graces with Sydnie.

"Of course, Mrs. Whitcomb. I'll make sure the door is installed properly."

"Fine. When you're through, please come to my office. It's up those stairs and the fourth door on the left." She pointed to a wide curving staircase at the end of the marble tiled hallway.

She set Fabio on the floor and together they strolled down the hall, her heels and his polished toenails clicking as they went. Trevor's gaze caught a ten-times larger-than-life painting of the poodle hanging among a gallery of family portraits on the west wall. So, the dog was treated to a larger portrait than the lady's husband.

"Wonder how old man Whitcomb likes finishing second behind a poodle?" Trevor shook his head. He couldn't help wondering how some people lost complete touch with reality.

He turned his attention to the solid oak, carved door and grimaced. What a shame to ruin such a fine piece of craftsmanship with a doggie door. But that's what the lady ordered, and that was what the lady was going to get.

Thirty-five minutes later, Trevor swept up the last of the saw dust shavings with his hand-held vac and packed away his tools. He gave himself a mental pat on the back. So far so good. It was still early enough to beat the rush hour traffic so he should make it back to Sydnie's office in about fifteen minutes. Once there, he'd invite her to a quiet dinner. Then he'd lay on the charm and work on getting some ideas.

The thought of holding Sydnie in his arms and kissing those full, sensual lips of hers made certain parts of his anatomy flare like a match when first lit.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

He liked Sydnie. A lot, as a matter of fact. And after seeing her again today, he wanted her in his arms now more than ever. He just wished he could win her on his own time, for his own reasons, and not Charles Smythe's.

He'd have to play his cards very carefully if he hoped to continue their relationship after this was all over.

Trevor pulled the bill out of his shirt pocket, picked up his tool box and headed for the staircase. He took the steps two at a time, anxious to get out of this shrine to Fabio. He paused in front of the fourth door and knocked.

"Come in."

Trev opened the door and immediately realized Mrs. Whitcomb's so-called office was her bedroom. She entered from an adjoining room wearing a bright red evening gown cut much lower than the first, revealing more than he cared to see.

"I'm sorry. I must have gotten the wrong room," Trevor said. He quickly backed out the door, pulling it shut as he went. But then he felt a tug and saw a handful of lethal looking polished red fingernails grasping the door.

"I assure you, Mr. Stud. You have the right room." She pursed her lips together and blew him a kiss.

Uh-oh. He was in deep trouble now.

"Please come in." She pulled the door wide and smiled. There was no way Trevor could miss the huge heart-shaped bed dominating the room. Red satin sheets shimmered in the warm lighting that beamed down on the bed like spotlights on a stage. A silver champagne bucket and a plate of strawberries waited on ice.

His gut tightened. He was in deep, deep trouble.

"Here's your bill, Mrs. Whitcomb," he said in a rush, shoving the paper into her hand. "I'm required to get a check before I leave."

"Very well. Business before pleasure." She turned and walked over to a gilded desk. The gown she wore gave her the appearance of floating across the plush carpeting. She pulled out a large checkbook and with a flourish of scrolling letters, wrote the check. "There you are."

Trevor nabbed the check and tucked it into his shirt pocket. "Looks like you're expecting your husband soon. I'll be on my way. Thank you very much, Mrs. Whitcomb. Don't bother showing me out. I can find my way."

"Not so fast, Stud. We aren't through yet." The woman grabbed the button of his jeans and pulled him around to face her. She ran her hand over his chest. "My husband is on one of his boring hunting excursions in Africa. He won't be home for another week."

Trevor swallowed hard and tried to think fast. He was in damn deep trouble here and he had the hunch he had Sydnie to thank for it.

* * * *

"So, you hired the carpenter," Casey said as she poured herself a glass of Chardonnay and Sydnie a beer.

Sydnie plopped down onto an overstuffed chair and propped her stockinged feet on the coffee table. "Yeah. I wanted to get even."

"Even? You know this guy?" Casey handed Syd her beer, then settled into the opposite chair and curled her legs beneath her.

"Yes. He's my ol' pal from Smythe and Jones." She took a drink and let her head fall back on the cushiness of the chair.

"Oh, so he's the one." Casey sipped her wine. "You never told me he was so good looking."

"Yeah, well, looks only go so far. He's arrogant, egotistical, and selfish. And he thinks he's Adonis or something. That promotion should have been mine. I worked my butt off for it. I deserved it. And wham! The next thing I know, he's getting all the credit for my work. And my promotion! Damn. My blood pressure is rising again." She downed a long swallow.

"Look at it this way. Maybe he did you a favor."

"You call cheating me out of a substantial salary increase a favor?"

"If you'd gotten the promotion, you wouldn't be here." Casey raised her wine glass, indicating Sydnie's office. "And this beats the corporate scene any day. No more answering to a boss. No more punching a time clock for someone else's benefit."

"And no more pantyhose!" Terri chimed in as she entered the room. She went straight to the fridge and poured herself a soda.

"What, no alcohol tonight?" Syd asked.

"No. I've got a ton of data to enter into the computer yet. I figured I'd better remain sober since this is our pocket at stake here." She fell into the last empty chair and kicked off her tennis shoes. Her feet joined Syd's on the coffee table.

"Shoot, I'm tired," she said as she rubbed her eyes. "So where is our new carpenter? He never checked back in with me. You did tell him he needed to report in after each job, didn't you, Syd?"

"Yes, I did." She glanced at the clock on the wall and frowned. "And I have to admit. I'm a bit worried."

"Worried?" Casey asked. "Why? He's a big boy."

"True, but Trevor should have been back over an hour ago."

"Maybe he went on home after he finished."

"I suppose he could have, but I doubt it. I sent him to Mrs. Whitcomb's to install that doggie door."

"Oh. Well that explains it. He'll be lucky to leave that house with his tool belt in one piece."

"Why? Is the dog vicious?" Terri asked in a sudden panic. "I don't know if our insurance covers dog attacks! I better pull the policy."

"Don't bother getting up, Terri," Casey said, and motioned for her friend to stay still.

"It's Mrs. Whitcomb we're worried about," Syd said. "She's known for her *bite* for younger men. I can't believe you haven't heard about her."

The sound of an outer door slamming silenced the conversation. The three women eyed each other, then turned toward the door of the office. There stood Trevor. His shirt was torn in shreds and bright red lipstick smudges covered his face. And by his stance, Sydnie knew he was mad as hell.

"I just remembered I've got a date tonight." Casey set down her glass, slipped on her sandals and hurried from the room. "See you all in the morning."

"I've got to go, too. It's supper time for Thomas O'Malley and he gets cranky if he doesn't get his kitty treats on time," Terri said as she grabbed her shoes and followed Casey.

Trevor slammed the door and moved to stand over Sydnie. She saw a muscle working at his jaw. "You set me up," he bit out.

"I did no such thing."

"The hell you didn't. You knew that old lady was like a Piranha ready to devour the flesh of any man who walked through her wrought iron gates."

"It was a legitimate job." Syd got to her feet. It was all she could do to keep from laughing at the sight of the lipstick smeared on his face. "Whew. You need a shower, Trev." She waved her hand in front of her nose. "Chanel No. 5 really isn't your fragrance." She walked to the bar sink and set down her empty beer.

"Dammit, Sydnie. Admit it. You set me up."

"I did not. The woman wanted a doggie door installed. I figured it would be an easy job for you to get started with. How was I to know she'd attack you?" Sydnie shrugged and forced back a smile. It really was fun to watch Trevor sweat.

"She took this Studs for Hire thing literally. I think you'd best be making it clear to your clients they don't get extras with the handyman work."

"Speaking of work. Did you get the door installed?"

"Yes. Fabio now has his own door at just the right height so he doesn't have to lift his precious little legs," Trev snapped.

"And did you do a good job?"

"Of course I did a good job. I'm not a schmuck."

"I just want to make sure. Customer satisfaction is our number one goal."

"As far as I'm concerned, the grand madam should be more than satisfied. We about wore a track in the carpeting around the bed. Who knew a seventy-year-old woman in heels could move so fast."

"I'm glad to hear you had such a good time." She smiled.

"Good time? Hell. That was a nightmare." Trevor raked his fingers through his hair. "You wouldn't happen to have another beer around here, would ya?"

"In the fridge. I don't normally allow employees such liberties, but I'll make an exception this time. You've had a rough first day."

Trevor scowled and popped the top on the beer bottle. He leaned against the bar and took a long swallow. "Ahh. I needed that."

"Did she pay you?" she asked as she cleaned up the assortment of take-out boxes and bags lined up on the bar.

"Yeah. I held onto it tight as I catapulted for the stairs in an effort to save my life." Trevor pulled the payment from his shirt pocket and waved it in front of Sydnie's nose. She moved to grab the check, but Trev snatched it away. "I ought to get ten-times my wage for this fiasco you put me through,

Syd. Unless—" a devilish grin spread across his face—"you personally want to make it right."

"In your dreams, Vanden Bosch."

He set down his beer and grabbed her hips. He pulled her tight against him, trapping the check between his fingers and her hipbone. "Every night," he drawled.

The feel of his strong hands on her body sent her pulse racing into overdrive. There went her blood pressure again. She really needed to remember who she was dealing with here. "Every night?" she whispered against his lips.

"Oh, yeah. Every night..." His day's growth of beard tickled her chin, and Sydnie forced herself to find every ounce of resolve she possessed to break up this tryst that was about to happen.

"Good for you." She eased her hand down the length of his arm and clasped his hand with her own. The strength and power in his fingers sent her pulse racing, but she couldn't let the scorching heat of his skin against hers attack her senses. She snatched the check from his grasp, broke the embrace and backed away. "Keep right on dreaming, Vanden Bosch, because that's as good as it's going to get."

Syd hurried to her desk and placed the check in a money bag. She hoped she didn't look as frazzled as she felt. It wouldn't do for Trevor to have any idea how he affected her libido.

The phone rang once, twice, three times.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" he asked.

"It's after hours. I'll let the machine get it." Sydnie glanced at the caller ID. "Uh-oh."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"What is it?"

"It's Mrs. Whitcomb."

"Damn. The woman doesn't give up."

After Sydnie's brief message, the machine beeped and the sex-crazed woman came on the line. "This is Mrs. Reginald Whitcomb. I want my money back. I wasn't satisfied with your service. What kind of stud runs from a woman anyway? He was supposed to chase me! I thought sex was a part of the deal! I want my money back, do you hear!?" A shrill series of barks punctuated the woman's words before the receiver went down with a slam and the line went dead.

Sydnie shot Trevor a look that she hoped would kill. "Thanks, Trev. We're just getting our business started and already I've got to smooth things over with an unhappy customer. Mrs. Whitcomb knows practically every affluent person in this city. She could ruin us in a matter of minutes at one of her cocktail parties."

"What about me? I'm the one who's been violated here. She attacked me." Trev jabbed his thumb against his broad chest.

"And you don't like the way that feels do you?" Sydnie lifted her chin and stood her ground. "Welcome to the club."

"Ohhh. I see where this is going. So I was right. You did set me up. You're still sore about me getting that promotion."

"I earned it, Trevor. You didn't. All you ever did was make my life miserable and steal the opportunity I'd been working toward for years. Don't you think I have a right to be sore?"

Trevor's gut clenched. He knew how much advancement in the ad agency had meant to Sydnie, but there was nothing he

could do about it now. It was done, in the past. He'd tried to explain to Smythe that Sydnie deserved the promotion, but his chauvinistic boss wouldn't hear of it. Charles Smythe didn't promote women.

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry, Syd? It's just the way things worked out."

"Sometimes sorry isn't good enough."

"Look. If it makes you feel any better, remember, I ended up getting the boot, too." Again, Trevor's gut clenched. He hated lying to Sydnie. She was a sweet, sexy woman who deserved better. And right now, Trevor despised his boss more than ever for putting him in this damnable situation.

The phone rang, shattering the heavy silence hovering between them. The machine beeped and a now familiar voice came on the line.

"Have Mr. Stud come back and finish the job and I'll be satisfied," Mrs. Whitcomb hollered. "If you aren't willing to appease me, then I'm calling the Better Business Bureau and reporting your company." Another bark from the illustrious Fabio followed before the line went dead.

Sydnie crossed her arms and shot Trevor her best, I'm going to ring your neck, look.

Trevor groaned. What the hell had Smythe gotten him into here?

CHAPTER THREE

Trevor entered his no-frills apartment to the sound of his phone ringing. For Pete's sake. Was that all his life was anymore, a series of phones ringing? It sure as hell wasn't a series of sexual encounters.

He grabbed the receiver. "Vanden Bosch."

"Where the hell've you been?" Smythe grumbled.

"Working," Trev grumbled right back.

"I've been trying to reach you for hours. I must have left a dozen messages on your cell phone. Why haven't you returned my calls?"

"I've been busy." In truth, Trev had shut off his cell earlier that afternoon so he wouldn't be bombarded with any more of Smythe's interrogations and threats.

"Getting information, I hope."

"I'm working on it."

"Well work harder. Alfred Mars is coming in first thing tomorrow morning and he's insisting upon seeing Sydnie. We need something to satisfy him with."

"Postpone. I need more time." Trevor combed his fingers through his hair in frustration. Sydnie was proving to be a tougher cookie to crumble than he'd first anticipated. Cripes, he wasn't any good at this subterfuge bit.

"Postpone? Are you nuts? You don't put off a man like Mars."

Trevor cursed under his breath. Smythe would never understand what he'd been through that afternoon. And

Trevor didn't have the energy to explain it. All he wanted to do was take a quick shower and crawl into bed. "I don't have anything to give you yet."

"Dammit, why not?! What have you been doing all day? You had plenty of time to seduce her and get us something."

Trevor groaned and shook his head. The man had no finesse. Sydnie needed to be handled with great care if he hoped to milk her for ideas on the Stardust Lingerie account. It was a wonder Smythe had made it this far in the advertising business. "Let's just say it's been a trying day."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," Smythe said with sarcasm. "Just get with the program. Do whatever it takes. Mars will be in my office in less than twelve hours. We've got to pacify him with something. We can't afford to lose this account, Vanden Bosch. And neither can you. Blow this and you're pounding the pavement, do you hear me?"

Trevor gritted his teeth at Smythe's all too familiar threat. "I can't be there."

"What?! You have to be. I need your help with this guy. He's as tough as a Mac truck." Mars was tough all right, and that was one reason he favored Sydnie. She was small in stature in comparison to the former pro-wrestler, but she knew exactly when, and how to stand up to him. She was a woman with a strong spirit and Mars admired her for it.

So did Trevor.

"Sydnie is expecting me at work in the morning. What is she going to think if I don't show up? I'll never get anywhere with her then."

"Call her and tell you can't be there for a few hours."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"It'll only be my second day on the job. She's suspicious enough the way it is. I don't want to do anything that'll add to her doubts."

"One little white lie won't hurt," Smythe said with irritation in his voice.

One little white lie? Try lie number one hundred and counting. "Like what?"

"Tell her you've got a prostrate exam you forgot about. She won't question you then, and she'll probably even be sympathetic."

"Wrong answer." Trev bent over an examination table sure as hell conjured up an attractive image. He rolled his eyes. No way was he going to tell the most enchanting woman he'd ever known that he was having a prostrate exam.

* * * *

Sydney hung up the phone after spending the better part of the morning trying to mollify Mrs. Whitcomb. Finally, after putting some slick smooth talking techniques she'd learned from her older brothers to work, she managed to convince the woman she had gotten exactly what she paid for. And then some. Mrs. Whitcomb was a happy camper once more and singing all kinds of praises about Studs for Hire.

"I'll be sure and tell all my friends," Mrs. Whitcomb chirped before hanging up the phone.

"It's about time for lunch," Terri said as she entered the office. She stood in front of Syd's desk. "What should we have today? Lobster? Filet Mignons? Or how about shark? I've

never eaten shark, have you? Course, I'm not really one for sea food, so it only makes sense that I've never eaten shark."

"I haven't even thought about lunch," Sydnie answered without really listening to her friend. "I've been busy smoothing things over with Mrs. Whitcomb after yesterday's fiasco."

"And did you?" Casey asked as she joined them.

"Everything's taken care of." Sydnie looked up from her impromptu notes for a much needed employee handbook. After only five minutes she'd nearly filled the page of a yellow legal pad. As soon as she got back from lunch, she'd start working on a company policy agreement that would be given to all clients before any work was begun. From now on, there would be no more misunderstandings about what services Studs for Hire offered.

"Great. Speaking of carpenters. I need one, and fast. We've got an emergency job on deck," Terri said.

"Yes. Where is our hotter-than-sin handyman?" Casey asked. "I haven't seen him all morning."

"Come to think of it, I haven't either. Did he check in with you, Sydnie?"

"Yes, he did. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was concentrating on how to handle Mrs. Whitcomb."

"So where is he? Don't tell me he quit already?" Casey asked with concern. "We didn't even get a chance for a first date."

Syd frowned at the idea of her friend dating Trevor. The two were cut from the same flamboyant, expensive bolt of cloth. And Sydnie could see Casey having a very brief affair

with a man like Trevor. She'd dated men like him before, but after getting her heart crushed a few times, she'd adopted the old adage—*opposites attract*.

Since then, Casey preferred to shy away from men as intelligent and headstrong as she. She liked being the one in control, and after a while most men grew tired of being her puppy dog on a chain. As a result, at age thirty, she was as unattached as a nun. To appease her trounced heart, she went out and spent money she didn't have.

Sydney on the other hand, preferred something much simpler and safer for her bank account.

Chocolate. The ultimate broken heart remedy, self-esteem booster, and aphrodisiac. Of course, the smooth creamy confections could wreak havoc with a girl's hips if she didn't gorge with caution.

"He didn't quit," Sydney reassured them. "He forgot he had a doctor's appointment this morning."

"Oh, I hope nothing's wrong. Is he sick? I hope my rabbit story didn't upset him," Terri muttered.

"He didn't say what the problem was."

"And you didn't ask," Casey stated dryly.

"No. I figured it was none of my business."

"I'd say it was more like you didn't want him to think you cared," Casey said.

"That's ... not true. He's nothing more than the hired help. I didn't want to pry."

"Sydney, you really should show more concern for our employees. Especially the new ones. We don't want them to start then quit right away. It's a paperwork nightmare."

"All Syd cares about is getting even, Terri."

"Even?"

"With Trevor. He's the one?"

Understanding dawned on Terri. "The one! Really? And you still hired him? I take back what I said. Maybe you *care* too much."

Sydnie rested her forehead on her fingertips and sighed. She shared everything in her life with her friends, and they, in turn, did the same with her.

But there was one small item she'd kept to herself. And that item was Trevor Vanden Bosch. Oh, she'd vented and cried on their shoulders about the jerk at work who'd robbed her of her career. But not once did she reveal his name.

Or that she thought he was the sexist man alive.

Or that he had the most unsettling way of making her blood simmer at a slow boil.

The sting of their *almost* torrid lovemaking scene in his office still haunted her dreams at night. But his rejection bit to the bone. What a fool she'd been to think Trevor had actually desired her.

But after all the hell and humiliation she'd been through, thanks to Trevor, she at least deserved the completion of that love scene.

Now who was dreaming?

"Let's go to lunch," Sydnie said. "I need chocolate."

* * * *

Trevor entered Charles Smythe's office to find Alfred Mars pacing the silvery-grey carpet, his hands tightly laced behind his back.

"I want to see Sydnie," Mars bellowed. "Where is she? You better not be monkeying with me."

"Of course we're not, Mr. Mars. Sydnie is..." Smythe looked at Trevor for help with the six feet, seven inches, two-hundred and eighty-five pound man.

"Sydnie is out town for a few days, Alfred," Trevor said.

"Why? She knew I was coming. She should be here."

"And she would be if she could. But her ... grandmother had a mishap and needed Sydnie's help."

"Oh? Nothing serious I hope," Mars said with genuine concern in his voice.

"Nothing serious. A few days of rest and she'll be fine."

"Good. Be sure and express my concern to Sydnie, will ya. And tell her I'm crestfallen I didn't get to see her."

Trevor bit his tongue. The last thing he wanted to do was let Sydnie know the wrestler, turned lingerie guru, was *crestfallen* over her absence.

"You are keeping in touch with her via phone or email, aren't you?" Mars asked.

"Of course."

"Good. Tell her I'm anxious to get rolling on this campaign." He resumed his pacing, the spot lighting in the office glistening off his clean-shaven head. "The Venus Bra is ready to hit the market. And I want to get a jump on the competition. I want our Celestial line of bras and panties to

finally outsell those that Victoria's Angels wear. I'm damn tired of finishing second."

"We'll do everything in our power to help you reach number one, Mr. Mars," Smythe said, clearly sucking up to the man.

And Trevor knew Mars deserved sucking up to. The Stardust Lingerie account was one of the agency's biggest. Unfortunately for Smythe and Jones, Mars still insisted that Sydnie be the one to personally handle his account. Trevor knew Mars had developed a crush on Sydnie from the day he'd met her at a benefit wrestling match. Thanks to Sydnie's business savvy and Mars's penchant for redheads, the agency landed the Stardust account. And after Mars saw Sydnie's ideas for promoting his lingerie, he was even more enamored with the girl who had a set of legs that wouldn't quit.

After each successful campaign, Mars showered Sydnie with exotic bouquets of Heliconias, Anthuriums, and Birds of Paradise shipped in directly from Hawaii. Now, after two years of hard work, Stardust Lingerie had maneuvered its way up the intimate apparel ladder to the number two spot.

"Number one is what I want. There's no reason why we shouldn't be, either. Our lingerie is made of the finest materials out there, and our designs are the sexiest."

"I agree, Alfred. Stardust is the only lingerie my wife wears," Smythe said.

"Good. How about you, Vanden Bosch?" Mars crossed his Herculean sized arms across his equally huge chest. He looked as though he could crush a piano as easily as an elephant crushed a peanut. He was definitely not a man a

person wanted to make an enemy of. "What does your wife wear?"

Trevor saw the glint of, *you better have the right answer*, in Alfred's eyes. "I'm not married. But I've given Stardust Lingerie as gifts. And my sister loves it. She won't wear anything else."

"I'm glad to hear it." Mars lowered his arms and smiled. "I'll be back in two days, gentlemen. I'll expect to see some ideas on the drawing board, Smythe."

"We'll have them for you, don't worry."

"Good." Mars sauntered toward the door and exited the room.

A ponderous silence hung in the air between Trevor and his boss. Funny, but he never noticed before how cagey Charles Smythe looked. In fact, if Trevor didn't know better, he'd think Smythe would cheat his own mother out of a ten-dollar bill. Had the CEO of the company changed that much over the last few months and Trevor just refused to see it?

"Well, what are you waiting for, Vanden Bosh?" Smythe asked at last. "You'd better hightail it over to your *new* job and get busy. We've got to have something drawn up before Mars comes back."

"I told you it's not enough time." Trevor shook his head. "It'll be tough enough to mention Stardust Lingerie to Sydnie, let alone quiz her for advertising ideas."

"By damn you'd better get something. Mars expects a colossal campaign and we're going to deliver." Smythe turned to the bar lining the wall of his plush office and poured himself a shot of bourbon. "You've got a way with the ladies,

Vanden Bosch. Lavish her with sweet nothings and she'll give you anything you ask."

"Sydney isn't that easily fooled. I've got to tread lightly or she'll figure out I'm up to something. In fact, I'm afraid she suspects already."

"Then distract her. If she finds out the real reason you're working for her, she'll be furious." Smythe downed his drink, then poured another. He moved to stand only a few inches away from Trevor. A dark scowl blanketed his features. "I don't care how you do it. Hell, sleep with her if you have to. Just get her ideas for the Venus bra." He swallowed his drink in one gulp. "Or you'll find yourself working for her permanently."

Trevor's protective instincts kicked in and demanded he punch Smythe in the teeth, putting the weasel in his place. Sydney wasn't, and didn't deserve to be referred to as, a cheap, easy fling.

Reluctantly, Trevor tamped down his temper and settled for a curse under his breath.

He was getting damn tired of being threatened with termination. If a possible partnership wasn't on the line, he'd be out of here. He could work for any ad agency in the country if he wanted to. But a shot at a partnership didn't come along every day.

"I'll do the best I can. That's all I can promise." Trevor strode toward the door, anger fueling his steps.

How was he going to get himself, and Sydney, out of this mess?

CHAPTER FOUR

"I'm back. Did you miss me?" Trevor asked Sydnie as he strode into her office.

"No," she said bluntly. She looked up from the papers on her desk and almost choked. The black T-shirt he'd worn yesterday had made him look hotter than a man should be allowed to, but today he wore white, and well ... with his whisky brown hair and tan skin ... ?

Oh, boy. White was supposed to remind a person of purity and innocence. But Trev's snug fitting T-shirt only made Sydnie think of blazing white-hot sin. A sin so delicious, so explosive, a girl could almost die from the sheer pleasure of it.

Lord. Her imagination was shifting into overdrive again. She really needed to banish these fiery emotions Trevor evoked in her.

With huge effort, she shook away her carnal thoughts, shot out of her chair and nearly tipped it over onto the carpeting. Feeling as clumsy as Terri, Sydnie hurried over to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of spring water and hid her embarrassment behind a long swallow.

"Are you feeling okay today, Syd?"

"I'm fine," she snapped.

"You don't act fine. I'd say you're a little jumpy."

"I said I'm fine." She took another swallow of water and caught Trevor staring at her with skepticism. "It's just the stress of getting the business off the ground. And I'm in the

middle of planning our grand opening. There's a ton of decisions to be made."

"Sounds like you could use a little R & R." He propped a lean hip on the edge of her desk and placed one strong hand on one equally strong thigh. He must spend hours at the gym pumping iron to get his muscles into such rock-hard perfection. And the bad part of it was, she'd like to remind herself *how* rock-hard those muscles were.

Sydney ruffled her hair in frustration. Every thought that popped into her head regarding Trevor was loaded with sexual innuendos. She had to stop this nonsense. Or run the risk of being sorry later down the road. Being burnt once was enough.

"I could help you with that R & R, if you'd like?" Trevor drawled. He quirked a brow and gave her one of his roguish smiles.

Damn his smiles. They sure didn't make it easy for a girl to be strong. Sydney turned her back on him in self-defense. "I don't have time to relax," she managed to say. She focused her attention on a pile of home improvement magazines she'd stacked on the counter earlier that morning. The only way to relax was if he left her alone.

Forever.

"Sometimes it isn't a matter of whether you have time or not, but what's best for your health."

Without even looking, Sydney knew he'd moved to stand directly behind her. The warmth of his body and the musky scent of his skin enslaved her common sense.

With the tip of his finger, he traced the length of her shoulder. The knit material of her navy T-shirt provided a poor barrier against his provocative touch. Her knees weakened and she felt herself leaning into that rock-hard solidness she fantasized about.

It would be so easy to give in and let things which were so taboo happen. She needed to regain control of this situation with Trevor—and fast—before it was too late.

The idea that he could seduce his way under her skin so easily frightened her. Was she that weak? That desperate for a man in her life that she was willing to give up her convictions, her standards, for a moment of pleasure?

Absolutely not. If there was one thing she'd learned from growing up in a family of four over-protective brothers and a macho contractor father, it was never to let a man run roughshod over her. She'd learned dog-eat-dog survival tactics at a young age.

"Speaking of which," she said as she stiffened her spine. She turned around and faced him. "How did you fair with the doctor this morning?"

"Ah ... great. He thinks I'm going to live a few more years."

"Wonderful," she said dryly. He gazed at her with eyes so dark, so intoxicating, they could hypnotize a nun. It would be so easy to walk into his arms and forget all about the past.

There she went again, drifting away from her resolve.

The past. Don't forget about the past. Sydnie analyzed his perfect smile. Yeah, Trevor Vanden Bosch was still a snake charmer through and through.

She skirted out from between him and the counter. "We've got a bunch of work lined up for you, so you'd better live. And we had an emergency call come in this morning, so I need you to head over to Fifty-Second Street first thing."

"But what about your R & R? I've got some great ideas on how to relieve stress. I thought maybe we could work on that this afternoon."

Sydney studied her potently-male employee leaning against the counter with cool confidence. Snoopy's altar-ego, Joe Cool, would be impressed.

A pang of suspicion hit her anew. "Since when have you been so concerned for my welfare?" she asked. It was time she found out why Trevor was really here.

"I've always cared about you, Syd," he said softly. His expression darkened.

"Ha!" Sydney laughed and tossed her empty water bottle into the recycle bin. "Save your breath, Vanden Bosch. I'm not buying your sympathy act."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Think what you will, but it's true."

"Really? You should have thought to be so considerate months ago."

Trevor didn't blame Sydney for being hurt and angry with him. He would be, too. And he deserved her censure, but he didn't have months to mend fences with her. To be precise—he glanced at his watch—he had exactly forty-four hours, thirteen minutes, and seven seconds to get things shifted into the right gear.

And the way Ms. Ice Cube was responding to his R & R suggestions, three hundred and sixty-fives days wouldn't be enough time. Trevor needed the help of some Devine intervention.

"I'd like to change your low opinion of me, Syd." He closed the distance between them. "Give me a chance. I'll prove to you that I really am a nice guy."

"All right." Sydnie shot him a razor-sharp smile. "You can begin by getting over to Fifty-Second Street and taking care of this little emergency." She shoved a work order into his hand.

"What's the emergency?" he asked with reservation. "This isn't another old lady, who's starving for male flesh, is it?"

"If only you could get so lucky," she snickered.

Trevor wanted to tell her what his idea of getting lucky was, but held his tongue. He didn't have time to make a misstep in this complicated dance with Sydnie.

"A client had a door busted in," Sydnie continued. "Put in a new lock set and you're good to go. Then take care of this job." She handed him a second work order. "If you're as good as you say you are, you should be able to get through both jobs this afternoon with no problem."

Trevor bit back a groan. Spending all afternoon away from Sydnie wasn't what he had in mind. He needed to be with her if he hoped to get any ideas for the Venus Bra.

The Venus Bra. That was his answer. He'd put that little scrap of silk and lace to work.

* * * *

"Sydnie, you have a delivery," Terri said as she popped her head through the doorway.

"I didn't order anything," Syd said without looking away from her computer screen. "I'm kind of busy here with grand opening plans. Just accept it and I'll look at it later."

"It's not that kind of delivery. It's a—you know—a gift delivery."

"Gift?" Sydnie stopped typing and looked at her friend. "Who would send me a gift?"

"Why don't you tell me? I'd like to know what you did to deserve what you're about to get. If you've got some kind of new strategy to catch a man, you'd better share."

"I have no strategy ... at least none that I know of," she sighed.

A young man, who looked as though he couldn't have been much older than a sophomore in high school, strolled into Sydnie's office carrying a massive bouquet of tropical flowers and an elaborately wrapped package.

"Are you..." he said from behind a Bird of Paradise blossom poking him in the eye, "Ms. Sydnie Riley?"

"Ah ... yes." Sydnie's tummy did a flip-flop at the sight of the bouquet the kid held.

"Awesome. This is for you." He thrust the flowers and package at her. A boyish grin covered his pimple-specked face.

"Gee, thanks." She struggled to balance the heavy arrangement with one arm.

"No problem. You know this delivery stuff is kind of fun. To think I'm responsible for bringing happiness into people's

otherwise depressing days. It's a heady experience, let me tell ya. I did make your day, didn't I?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Yeah, sure." She gently set the flowers on her desk and reached into a drawer and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. She stuffed it into the kid's sweaty palm.

"Way cool. Thanks, ma'am." He walked toward the door, then stopped. "You know. I just got to say it. He said you were hot. He wasn't blowin' smoke, either. You are hot! And I'd like to add, mighty fine! But hey." He held up his hands and grinned. "I got a girl on the line, so I'm not really available at the moment. Maybe some other time." He winked.

Sydney shook her head. She didn't know whether to be flattered or depressed by Sophomore Boy's declaration. If teenagers were the only age bracket of the male species that found her attractive these days, she was in serious trouble.

"That's okay. I'm not really available, either."

"Yeah, I guess not. Any guy who'd send you a two hundred-dollar bouquet of erotic flowers is seriously staking a claim, if you ask me."

"Erotic? I think you mean, exotic."

"No, I mean erotic. Look at those things," he said, pointing to an Anthurium. "That guy sure knows his flowers."

"Guy?"

"The dude you got this stuff from."

"Yes, but do you know who this *guy* is?" she asked, hoping for information.

"Sure." He shrugged his shoulders.

"And *he* is?"

"Sorry. I'm not at liberty to disclose that information. Goes against company policy. But he did mention something about the card explaining everything. Got to run, babe. More deliveries to make, and more hearts to break." He shot her another wink and swaggered out of the room.

"What the heck was all that about?" Terri asked.

"You tell me. Things have changed since we were in high school. I feel old."

"Me, too. But hey, by the looks of these flowers, all is not lost for you. Flowers like this cost a small fortune."

"Money isn't everything. He could be a real jerk. I'm prone to attract jerks, remember? I hold our high school record for the most jerks attracted in a single year."

"How could I forget. I finished second, remember? But by the looks of that delivery boy, I'd say you're not in danger of losing your title."

"He was just flirting," Sydnie said defensively. Even after all these years, she still couldn't help but feel for the underdog, the non jocks, the nerds. Probably because she'd fallen in the underdogs' category all her life. "We weren't exactly the prom queens of our class, either, you know."

"Yeah, well, flirting is flirting. Truthfully, I'd be ecstatic if he flirted with me." Terri frowned and a tinge of sadness filled her eyes. "I'd even flirt back. When a girl is old and lonely, she'll take any bone thrown her way."

"Oh, stop it. I won't listen to this. The right man will come along for you, Terri. Don't give up hope."

"What are we giving up hope on now?" Casey asked as she entered the room.

"Our usual topic," Terri answered. "We were commiserating over the lack of eligible, decent, good-looking men in our lives. I hate to say it, but I'm disappointed. I thought this Studs for Hire business would be like a full-fledged feast of hot men set out before us."

"Give it time," Sydnie said.

"Oh, my stars! Whose glorious bouquet?" Casey picked up the flowers and drooled over them almost as much as she drooled over any genuine gemstone.

"Sydnie's."

"You got flowers like this, and you're boo-hooing?"

"I wasn't boo-hooing."

"She's afraid they might be from someone on her long list of jerks," Terri giggled.

Sydnie glared at her friend.

"So, who are they from?" Casey asked.

"I don't know."

"Don't know? Isn't there a card?"

"Yes, but I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Rip that baby open. I want to know who the man is that sends this kind of bouquet. And then I want to meet him ... that is if you don't want to date him, Syd."

Sydnie stifled a groan. She wanted to know who he was, too. But she had to admit, she was afraid to find out, and afraid of being disappointed like so many times before.

Sydney pulled the red and gold glittery envelope off the package and slit the flap with her trusty letter opener. An equally glittery card was folded inside.

Her heart did a double take before stopping completely. She lifted the flap and read ... *Don't call me. I'll call you.*

She couldn't help letting a frown of disappointment tug at her lips. Great. Just great. The guy liked to play love games, or figured she was psychic.

"Well? What does it say?" Casey asked.

"Don't call me. I'll call you," Sydney read aloud with about as much enthusiasm as if she were reading this year's tax laws.

"That's it? No name? Not even a hint?" Casey plucked the card from between her friend's fingers.

"That's all it says."

"Who do you know that has exotic enough taste to send these kinds of flowers, not to mention whose wallet is thick enough to pay for them?" Casey asked.

"No one. Well, maybe ... but no." Sydney shook her head. "He has no reason to send me flowers now."

"Open the package," Terri said excitedly. She picked up the box wrapped in red foil paper with glittering gold stars and matching ribbon. She held the package close to her ear and shook with all the enthusiasm of an excited child on Christmas morning. "Maybe this will give you a clue as to who it's from. Don't you just love surprises?"

"She's right." Casey snatched the box from Terri and shoved it at Sydney. "Open it."

Sydney took a deep breath and pulled at the tails of the big, fancy bow adorning the entire top of the box. With her fingernail, she slit the tape on the ends and removed the pretty paper with care. She took another deep breath and slowly lifted the lid. Tissue paper that matched the outer wrapping filled the inside. She peeked beneath the paper and ... swallowed. Heat pricked her cheeks, her ears, her neck, and just about everywhere else on her body.

"Well?" Terri said impatiently. Syd lifted the sparkling tissue so her friends could see. "Holy cow! Will you look at that."

"Well, now. Sexy lingerie. I'd say this has to be from someone you know quite well," Casey drawled. "You've been holding out on us."

"If I've been holding out on you, then I've been holding out on myself, too," Sydney quipped.

"Take it out of the box. I want to get a better look," Terri said.

Sydney lifted the matching bra and thong panty out of the box and held them up to the light. Well, what there was of them. And that wasn't much. The lingerie was nothing more than a few morsels of black knit and sheer lace. In fact, the fluorescent lights in her office shone right through the fabric. A small pair of ruby-red lips accented the upper left side of the panties and the word Venus was stitched below in a flowing script.

"Very pretty." Casey smiled and winked. "Very sexy, and very ... inviting. This guy doesn't mess around, does he? He knows what he wants and gets right to the point."

Terri grabbed the red tag dangling by a gold thread from the bra. "The Venus Bra. Stardust Lingerie."

"Stardust Lingerie! So these are from Alfred. I'll be damned."

"Alfred? You mean Alfred Mars the pro wrestler turned lingerie mogul?" Casey asked.

"The one and only."

"I remember you said he always sent you exotic flowers after a successful ad campaign as a thank you. But why would he be sending you flowers now? You don't work at Smythe and Jones anymore," Terri said.

"I don't know. Maybe he misses me," Syd joked.

"Well, whatever his reason, I guess you'll have to wait for him to call you to find out," Terri added.

"Wait! What for? He's obviously interested in you. Why don't you go ahead and call him, Syd? The man is mega rich. Snatch him while you can."

"No way. I'm not calling him, Casey. I'll do what the card says—wait for him to call me."

"Oh, phooey. Waiting is boring," Casey said.

"But that's what the note says to do."

"Getting back into an old habit of listening to men, are we?" Casey tapped a red polished fingernail adorned with an American flag on the desktop.

"No. I'm not. I'm just playing it safe. I could be wrong here. Alfred might not have sent this. I'll play it cool for a few days and see what happens. I'd really rather not embarrass myself if I can help it." Syd plunked down in her chair, placed her feet on the desk, and admired her flowers. "Besides, he

could have another surprise in store for me. I wouldn't want to spoil it, now would I?"

Uneasiness twisted in the depths of Sydnie's stomach. *Yeah, like wearing his lingerie for him! And then taking his lingerie off for him! Oh, boy.*

"I bet he does plan on surprising you again," Casey said with a tone that echoed Syd's exact thoughts.

Uh-oh. Maybe she was in some serious trouble here. She liked Alfred. She really did. But she never pictured them together as a couple ... or as lovers. He was always just a client to her. Could she ever look at Alfred in the same light as she saw Trevor? Light? What exact kind of light did she see Trevor in?

"I watched Mars wrestle a few times on TV before he retired," Terri said, interrupting Syd's thoughts. "Must be nice to retire at thirty-two. But anyway, the man is huge. A regular Goliath. He'd crush you, Syd."

Sydnie swallowed hard. Terri was right. Alfred was a giant. And that probably meant he was a giant ... *everywhere.*

Oh, dear.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trevor double-checked the address on the work order Sydnie had shoved into his hand before she pushed him out the office door. So much for spending this rainy afternoon getting intimate and snitching Sydnie's advertising ideas. He couldn't think of a better way to spend a dreary day than snuggling in the arms of a hot redhead. A nice warm fire, a bottle or two of aged, smooth wine, and hours to kill with a woman he fantasized about on a minute by minute basis, sounded perfect to his ears.

But no. Here he stood in the drizzle wondering if he was the one being played for the fool in this fiasco.

More than a little aggravated, Trevor brushed at the droplets hitting him in the face and glanced at the address adorning the porch of the red brick home. He was at the right place. Time to get to work.

It didn't look like there was any major emergency here. The two story house appeared well kept, and the yard was recently mowed.

But a funny feeling gnawed at his gut. Something was off here, and he'd bet his brand new, fresh-out-of-the-case, cordless drill he was right. In fact, he'd rather have a root canal done than climb those steps leading up to the front door and discover what awaited him on the other side.

What if this woman had the wrong idea like the last one and thought he was a *stud* for hire? For some reason Trevor

never pictured himself in the same vain as a highly sought after prize thoroughbred.

He rubbed the tense muscles in his neck and sighed. The ordeal with Mrs. Whitcomb yesterday was beyond bizarre, so he was more than a little gun shy. He never thought he'd dislike being the object of a woman's desire. But then he never thought he'd face the occasion when a seventy-plus woman was the one doing the desiring. The fact the woman was old enough to be his grandmother twined his stomach into knots.

Maybe he shouldn't have eaten that second apple turnover this morning. The Danish were rich, surgery sweet, and now sticking to his stomach like carpenters' glue.

A crash of thunder rumbled overhead and Trevor squinted up at the grey sky. Damn. There was no sense in putting off the inevitable any longer. If he wanted to get close to Sydnie, he had to do the jobs she put him up against. And do them well, and do them fast. The clock continued to tick whether he made any headway with Sydnie or not.

He reached for his tool box in the back of the truck and cursed silently as his hand gripped the wet handle. If this rain ruined any of his tools, he was going to make his boss replace them. It would serve Smythe right for insisting Trevor drive this pile of rust on rust.

"Hello there. Are you the carpenter I called for?" a sultry voice asked.

Trevor turned toward the direction of the voice. An attractive brunette leaned against a pillar on the front porch and waved at him.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

A surge of relief washed over Trevor. She didn't look like a sexed-crazed, seventy-year-old. And to be honest, she looked pretty darn sexy standing there in her short black skirt and skin tight red sweater.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

He strode down the walk, up the porch steps, and was greeted by cleavage that would make any man's testosterone kick into high gear. Hunger simmered in the woman's vivid blue eyes as she checked him out from head to toe.

"Yum." She licked her lips and smiled. "The ad says Studs for Hire. They weren't kidding. You look delicious enough to eat, big boy."

Great. Just great. Trevor took a quick step back to put some distance between them, but it was a futile effort. She sauntered closer and ran a perfectly manicured nail along the collar of his wet T-shirt. Before he could gather his wits, she stroked his jaw with an index finger.

"Ah ... well, thanks," he coughed behind a fist. He tried not to pay attention to the plunging neckline or the buttons threatening to pop on her sweater, but it was impossible. So much skin and cleavage showed that if she moved her arm to the right, a mere fraction of an inch, she'd fall out and none of Omaha would need Pay-Per-View.

In spite of the damp, cool air, an embarrassing heat spurred at Trevor's neck like hot flames. He was really going to have to speak to Sydnie about her advertising strategies. All these women were getting the wrong impression about Studs for Hire.

Now, if he could get Sydnie to come onto him like this, he'd be in business.

He took another step back, snuck a deep breath, and prepared himself for what was to come. "I understand you need a door repaired," he said, trying to take charge of the situation.

"Sure do, big boy." She snuggled close and her breasts rubbed lightly against his chest. Trevor swallowed hard and tried to remain calm, cool, and collected. He sure as hell hoped his deodorant kicked in like the commercial claimed it would when under intense pressure.

He tried to move farther back, but his body met up with one of the pillars. Dead end.

Stealing a glance to his right, then to his left, he prayed no one was out in their yard gaping at them. A clap of thunder crashed across the sky. No one would be crazy enough to stand out in this weather to watch this little scene transpiring on their street. No. They'd all be peeking from behind the warmth and security of their living room curtains.

Fortunately, it was after one o'clock in the afternoon. Everyone on this block should be at work somewhere.

"I do admire a man who can drive a nail home," she purred into his ear right before she sucked his earlobe between her teeth.

Damn. And double damn. He was beginning to feel like a choice cut of prime beef.

"Doreen!" a deep voice bellowed.

The woman jumped back as though she'd been stung and quickly smoothed her skirt and adjusted her cleavage.

"Doreen! Where the hell are you?" A man the size of an NFL linebacker strode from the south side of the wraparound porch.

"I was just checking out his credentials, Donny."

"Yeah, I bet you were," the man grumbled. He eyed Trevor with a look that said *touch my woman and you're buzzard bait*.

A fierce growl filled the air and Trevor knew that rumble wasn't coming from the linebacker's stomach. He glanced down and saw the man held a lug chain that led to a collar that was around the neck of one massive, angry-looking Rottweiler.

Oh, shit!

Dogs and Trevor never did get along the best. He preferred to admire them from a distance. A great distance. Especially dogs that could out run, and out weigh a small horse.

"Nice dog," Trevor said. "What's his name?"

"Rocky." Figures. "But he'll answer to Rock, too. It's about time you got here, carpenter. What took you so long?" He continued to study Trevor through slitted eyes.

"Sorry about the delay. I got here as soon as I could. We've been swamped with calls." The dog growled again and showed his incisors as if to tell Trevor he knew he was lying.

"Cool it, Rock," the man said and tugged on the chain. The dog quieted immediately and sat down on his haunches, but his lip continued to quiver.

Trevor wanted out of here. Now!

But there was no escape. He'd have to jump the railing and land in the bushes a good four to five feet below. The yard dropped off so sharply, that he'd probably end up falling on his ass and rolling down to the street and out into oncoming traffic. Becoming road kill wasn't one of the items Trevor had put on his list of things to accomplish in life.

"I'd love to stand here and chat," Trevor said, "but I'm on a tight schedule today. What door needs fixing?"

"I'll show you," Doreen said with a smile.

"No, you won't," the linebacker ordered. "I'll show him. Heel, Rock." The man and his beast headed back around the south side of the house and Trevor followed.

"Later, big boy," Doreen whispered in his ear as he passed. She smiled and boldly placed a quick kiss on his cheek.

Rocky whirled around so fast that Trevor didn't even realize the dog had a death hold on his jeans until he tried to scramble to his feet.

The dog tugged and pulled and snarled as he made confetti out of Trevor's clothes.

"Let go, Rock," the man ordered. At once the dog loosened his hold on Trevor's jeans and sat down. "Rocky is like me. He doesn't cotton to anyone messing with things that don't belong to them."

Trevor wanted to shout that he didn't want to touch Doreen. Doreen was the one doing the touching here! But he knew he might as well tell it to the dog for all the more good it would do. The best thing to do in a situation like this was keep his mouth shut.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

But he hoped Sydnie's insurance was paid up and that her policy covered beatings by enraged boyfriends, and dog maulings.

* * * *

Sydnie glanced at the small digital clock she'd placed next to her I Dream of Jeannie bottle and saw that it was well after nine.

For the past six hours she'd been laying out brochures, business cards and ads for the business on her computer. She needed a well-deserved break. Too bad she couldn't be like Jeannie and blink everything done. Having magical powers would save a person a ton of stress. How nice it would be if the only thing she had to worry about was how to get a good-looking astronaut into her bottle.

She saved the last changes to the ad she'd been working on, leaned back in her chair, and enjoyed the music playing softly through the stereo speakers. The office was enshrouded in darkness except for a small circle of light around her desk. The tension in her neck muscles began to ease and she realized she could fall asleep right here in her chair.

A whiff of fragrance from the flowers she'd received earlier that day drifted in the room. The bouquet stood regally on the coffee table where Terri had placed them, reminding her the man who had sent them, would be calling.

The exotic flowers really were beautiful and expensive. But she still didn't understand why Alfred would send them to her. Since she no longer worked for Smythe and Jones, she didn't have anything to do with Alfred's account anymore. Sure,

he'd sent her flowers in the past, but those were nothing more than thank yous for a job well done.

Or were they?

Maybe he'd sent them for another reason this time and she'd failed in the past to see his interest. Trevor had grudgingly mentioned on several occasions that he thought Mars' fascination for her was more than mere professional. He'd made it a point to tell Sydnie that he thought Mars was an oversized Don Juan and she'd only wind up hurt in the deal if she fell for his charms.

But Sydnie didn't heed Trevor's words of caution and shrugged them off as jealousy on his part. Besides, she'd only had eyes for Trevor. How silly of her.

She and Trevor had played a sexual tug-of-war for months. They'd flirted, teased, argued, locked tongues a time or two, and almost did—but didn't. They discreetly behaved like lovers for the office staff, but weren't.

And when she decided she was tired of the word *almost*, she took action. After weeks of wanting to, but knowing she shouldn't with a co-worker, the little devil on her shoulder won out and demanded she *go for it*.

Only *going for it* meant getting her heart trounced on. Big time. Trevor played along with her seduction scene, then, just as things were really getting interesting on the top of his desk, he turned her down flat and said they needed to put a stop to their so-called association.

Devastated and heartbroken, she spent the night devouring her favorite ice cream. The next morning she found out the reason for Trevor's brush-off via the office gossip mill.

Two days earlier Charles Smythe had awarded Trevor the promotion they'd both been vying for. And worst of all, Sydnie had been reassigned to work directly under Trevor. He was now her boss, not her equal as he once was.

Cruel snickers and gossip about their fractured relationship spread through the agency like wild fire, and by noon, she'd had enough. The rejection, not to mention the humiliation, stung worse than anything Sydnie had ever imagined. She packed her few belongings in a box, scribbled a note of resignation—as far as she was concerned, they weren't worth the time it'd take to type one—tossed the letter in Smythe's lap, and stormed out of Smythe and Jones forever.

Sydnie Riley was a free woman.

And thanks to that moment of redheaded stubbornness and pride, she was a much happier woman.

She picked up the box containing the bra and thong and fingered the smooth material. So, what to make of Alfred's gift. Most likely he wanted to wish her luck with her new business and this was his unique way of saying so. After all, he owned the second largest lingerie company in the country—why would he send anything else? At the same time he was giving a gift, he was promoting his product. It was smart business, and Syd would do the same.

But then again ... She pulled the note out of the glittery envelope. *Don't call me. I'll call you.*

She sighed. That could mean almost anything.

Mars was a savvy businessman who'd taken over his grandmother's struggling lingerie company when he'd retired from the wrestling scene. With a lot of hard work and

persistence, he'd built the company into the giant it was today, and in the process had clipped a few feathers off the wings of Victoria's Angels.

If anyone understood the work involved in getting a business up and running, it was Mars. Yeah, he was wishing her luck.

She studied the bra and panty with a savvy shopper's eye. The black material felt like velvet between her fingers, yet it was so sheer in places, she could almost see through it.

Doubts hit her anew. Really—what kind of man would send such sexy, provocative lingerie as a good luck present?

A man who wants you, that's who. Sydnie shook her head. "Nah. I'm dreaming. Alfred's just a nice guy who likes to give presents."

The sudden urge to try on the bra surprised her. It would be fun to feel as sexy and provocative as Aphrodite, if only for a little while.

Sydnie grabbed the lingerie, poured herself a glass of Casey's Chardonnay chilling in the fridge, and headed for the bathroom. She turned on the shower, ready to wash away the day's stresses so she could have some recharge time then get back to work.

Stripped of her jeans and T-shirt, she stepped under the spray and sighed. She welcomed the warm, soothing massage of the water on her face and shoulders and let go of the tensions knotting her muscles.

Trevor was right about one thing—she needed to relax. A bit of downtime and she'd be able to banish the possibility of Alfred Mars wanting more from her than a platonic

relationship. Not that being in a relationship with Alfred would be all that bad. He was nice looking, if you liked the bald type, and Casey was right, he was mega rich. He valued and respected women for all they were, not just how pretty, or how hot they were in bed. Alfred admired a woman for her mind.

And, unlike someone else she knew, Alfred admired Sydnie's mind, not her breasts.

She should call him. Taking their acquaintance to the next level could be a good thing.

But first, she had to do something about Trevor. Maybe after that R & R he kept harping her about, she'd be able to oust her returning desires for him, too.

Yeah. Fat chance.

Trevor was like caffeine, ice cream, or computer solitaire. Addictive as hell.

His devilish smile, rakish brown hair and sharp sense-of-humor, all made him tough to resist. She thought she'd beaten her addiction, but all he had to do was show up on her doorstep in a pair of well-worn, faded blue jeans, and the weeks of struggling to work him out of her system, were for naught.

Maybe a few dates with Alfred would help her to kick the Trevor habit for good. She'd wait a few days for Alfred to call, and if he didn't, she'd call him. It was high time that she took a chance in the dating scene again.

She grabbed a bottle of apple scented shower gel and rubbed the crystal-red liquid over her body and into a lather.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

The water and gel caressed her skin and the last of her tensions melted away.

At first, Sydnie had argued with Casey about putting showers in each of their offices, but now she was glad her friend had won the fight. It was a great place to solve a girl's problems.

* * * *

Trevor braked the truck to a stop in the parking lot of the Studs for Hire office and cut the engine. The building was dark, and the lot was empty except for Sydnie's yellow 1973 Gran Torino Sport. Trevor grinned. A man had to respect a woman who drove a classic muscle car.

"She must be working late. Perfect."

He removed his cell phone from his belt and tossed it in the glove box. They would be alone, and he'd have a chance to do some serious seducing. That is if he could get his aching body to cooperate. He swore he'd pulled a groin muscle after hurdling Doreen's backyard fence to avoid being attacked a second time by Rocky the Rottweiler. Trevor hadn't jumped hurdles since he was in high school, and his body was reminding him of that fact at this very moment.

He stepped out of the truck and winced. His muscles had tightened up during the short drive back to the office. Great. Just call him the *Limping Casanova*.

He dug in his pocket and pulled out the key to the back door he'd talked Terri into giving him that afternoon. The step up to the sidewalk surrounding the building might as well have been six feet tall for the stiffness he felt as he lifted his

foot the mere three inches. He groaned and cursed under his breath. He hoped he could get some ideas out of Sydnie soon. Otherwise, if he had to do this Studs for Hire thing much longer, he'd be crippled for life. Who knew carpentry work could be hazardous to one's health?

Quietly, he inserted the key in the lock and turned. He pushed open the door and was greeted by a long, dark hallway. Closing the door behind him, he relocked it to insure they wouldn't be disturbed. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and to listen for any sounds of movement. The faint sound of music drifted through the building.

Trevor slowly made his way down the hall and prayed there wasn't anything sitting in his path. The last thing he needed was to fall on his face, throw out his back, and have to woo Sydnie from a hospital bed while he was in traction. He'd experienced enough humiliation in the last two days to last him a lifetime. He didn't need anymore.

Trevor rounded the corner and a streak of light beamed on the lobby carpeting from a crack in Sydnie's office doorway. Stealing a peek through the crack, he noticed a small lamp on, and a couple of candles flickering on her desk.

Sydnie was nowhere in sight.

Her screen saver fish swam back and forth, indicating the computer had been sitting idle for a while.

The CD player changed disks and Barry Manilow started singing *Copacabana*. And so did Sydnie. So, she was a Barry fan. Who would have guessed this sassy redhead, with more

grit then a lot of men, harbored a soft spot for the master of mood music.

Sydney Riley was a never-ending surprise.

Trevor pushed the door wider and peered deeper into the room. He could hear her soft, breathy voice, but he still couldn't see her.

The creak of a hinge caught his attention and he flattened his frame against the wall. Sydney's shadow fell across the floor as she opened the door of her office bathroom. She danced out into the faint light.

Trevor stuttered and sucked in his breath, about choking at the sight of her wearing the Venus Bra and matching thong panty.

Hot damn! She took the bait.

She stepped and swayed with the music and gave him a nice view of her bare backside. She shook her hips to the beat, and Trevor's heart went spastic in his chest.

Double hot damn! Whoever invented the thong panty was one hell of a smart man.

Beads of sweat broke out on Trevor's forehead, his palms turned clammy, and his throat went dry. How could he have forgotten how beautiful Sydney was? Well, he'd never really forgotten, just tried not to remember her body was one that any man would die for. And Stardust Lingerie did a fantastic job of accentuating certain—already perfect—curves.

Alfred Mars was a genius. Trevor would have to remember to tell Mars so the next time he saw him.

Professional models had nothing on Sydney. She could model that bra and panty and make every man in the country

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

scramble out to buy a set for his own woman in hopes that they, too, would look like her.

What man in his right mind wouldn't want to come home to this?

The music intensified and Sydnie twirled and shook her shoulders, presenting him with a provocative view of the swell of her breasts and some serious cleavage. Trevor groaned. Oh, what luscious breasts they were, too. His knees weakened with want and full-blown need and he grasped the door jamb to keep himself from collapsing to the floor with a coronary.

Get a grip, Vanden Bosch. You're losing your cool. And now is not the time.

Or was it? Right now he didn't give a hoot about advertising, or his job. Trevor had reached the gates of Heaven, and he wanted in, no matter the cost. No matter the consequences.

Copacabana ended and a slow, typical heart-wrenching Manilow tune filled the room. Sydnie picked up a wine glass and took a sip. He watched, fascinated by the lean smoothness of her throat as she swallowed. Casually, she sat in her chair and put her bare feet up on her desk and hummed along with the music. Trevor swallowed hard. Her legs were oh, so long, so tan, so damn perfect. The fantasy of her wrapping those legs around him made his blood roar through his veins.

She set her wine glass on the desk, leaned her head back and let her chestnut hair fan over the back of the chair. She closed her eyes and continued humming softly along with

Manilow. The music and faint lighting created the perfect atmosphere for a little seduction.

And Sydnie was dressed for seduction. He was so in luck. Trevor had never seen a more erotic site in his life. The response his body was having, proved it, too.

Sydnie had unknowingly played right into his hands.
Or had she?

Maybe she'd hoped he'd show up *unexpectedly* at her office. Maybe she still wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Slowly, he walked into the room and stopped beside her chair. He watched, mesmerized as her delicious lips mouthed the words to the song.

He had to taste those lips. He had to know if they were as sweet as they looked.

The delicate scent of apples and spices teased his nose. A golden powder glistened on her skin like stars.

He had to taste her. All of her.

Gingerly, he knelt down and bit back a groan of pain that shot through his leg. The effort was worth the agony. And the seductive rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed sent his yearnings shifting into warp drive, making him forget all about his trials of the day.

God, how he wanted her.

The rapid fire of his heart confirmed he'd failed to forget this woman like he planned to. But how could he ever really forget a woman like Sydnie Riley? That was an impossible task—one that he'd never accomplish no matter how hard he tried. She was just so right, so perfect for him.

And that truth scared the hell out of him.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Better to acknowledge the truth than run from it your whole life, his grandmother had always said. The only trouble with his grandmother's logic was that he didn't know how to win Sydnie, and keep from losing his job at the same time.

And he needed his job. After all, he had a car payment to make.

He reached out to touch Sydnie but stopped, not wanting to spoil this special moment. It would be so wonderful to stand here and watch her like this for hours. Oh, the fantasies he could conjure up in his devilishly creative mind.

As if sensing his presence, Sydnie stirred and turned her face toward him while slowly opening her eyes.

"Hello, Syd," he drawled.

CHAPTER SIX

"What the hell are you doing here?!" Sydnie sprang out of the chair and grabbed and held her Jeannie bottle like a baseball bat, ready to whack her intruder over the head with it if necessary.

"Whoa!" Trevor jumped out of striking distance. "Don't do something you'll regret. I hear those bottles are getting kind of rare."

"Not as rare as you're going to be if you don't tell me what you're doing in my office," Sydnie said with more than a little hysteria in her voice.

He put out a placating hand. "I was watching you," he said calmly. He gave her one of his devilish grins.

"Ha! Watching?! Like hell you were." Trevor Vanden Bosch hadn't changed one ounce. He was still as cocky, as arrogant, and as infuriating as ever. What the hell had she been thinking to let him sweet-talk his way back into her life so easily? *Sydnie, you idiot.* She shook her head. "You were spying on me!"

He shrugged. "It's been most..." His gaze traveled the length of her body, then up again, not stopping until he reached the apex of her thighs. "Electrifying," he drawled.

A prickling heat nipped at Sydnie's skin, and at certain strategically located points on her body. The urge to push aside her reservations toward Trevor gnawed at her like an out-of-control hunger. It would be so easy to put the bottle down and rip his T-shirt right off his back.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Hot sex in her office. It was a major fantasy of hers, and Trevor was down right tempting.

What would happen if she threw caution to the wind? Surely spending one night in his strong arms couldn't hurt a thing. They weren't, after all, vying for the same position like before. She owned Studs for Hire. She was the boss. And there was nothing Trevor could do to change that.

Sydney was in charge here. Not Trevor Vanden Bosch. Not Charles Smythe. Not anyone. Just her.

Besides, Trevor owed her.

If she wanted to use him for sex, then why not? Other women did it. Men had made a habit of using women for their pleasures for centuries, and after thousands of years of submission, women had earned the right to do the same.

But she knew better. Her feelings for Trevor still ran too deep.

She wanted more than just one night.

She wanted a lifetime.

"Watching you dance was almost erotic," he added.

Almost? What did he mean by almost? Wasn't she good enough, or sexy enough to be erotic? And what about *erotic*? Was that the only way he saw her, as a piece of meat filleted specifically for his taste buds?

Sydney's already simmering blood bubbled to a hard boil in two seconds flat. What a moron she was to let herself think Trevor had changed and that maybe he'd come to respect her as an equal in the business world. But she realized now—too late again, as usual—that the only respect he had for her was how well she filled out a bra. It always amazed her how men

let a specific part of their anatomy do the majority of their thinking for them.

"How long have you been spying on me?" she seethed.

"Watching," he corrected. He propped a hip against the corner of her desk and crossed his arms. A Craftsman tape measure was hooked on his right-hand pocket. "And it was only long enough to decide all you need is a basket of fruit on your head and you'd make one sexy Cabana girl. You've given me a whole new appreciation for the song Copacabana, Syd."

Embarrassment fused with the anger already consuming her sensible side. He'd been watching her samba around her office in her briefs for God knows how long. And very skimpy briefs at that. She wanted to crawl under the desk and die, but first she'd like nothing better than to choke him.

"I never really liked that song," he said as he pushed away from the desk, shortening the distance between them. "But thanks to you, I'll never be able to listen to it the same way again," he quipped.

No. Choking was too good for him. He deserved to be thrashed within an inch of his measly life.

"Get out!"

"Ah, *deja vu*, Syd." Trevor quirked a brow. "You told me to get out two days ago. But, I'm still here." He lifted a curl off her shoulder and twisted it around his finger.

Instinctively, she took a step back, but he held fast. "Don't remind me," she said. "I hate it when I make mistakes."

He wound more of the curl around his finger, pulling her closer and shortening the distance between them once again.

Only inches of invisible air and a Jeannie bottle stood between them.

"Mistake? Is that what this is, Syd?" With his free hand he covered hers holding onto the bottle for dear life. "A mistake?"

"Yes..." she stuttered. "You know damn well it is."

"No." He slowly shook his head. "Letting you go the first time was the mistake." He eased the bottle from her grasp and set it on the desk. Before she could protest, his hand cupped her shoulder and squeezed ever so lightly. "Perfect. Just like I remember." His thumb drew tiny, tantalizing circles on her skin and sent her mind spinning with questions of *should she* or *shouldn't she*, and plain old-fashioned desire.

Her eyes fluttered closed and she inhaled the muskiness of his cologne mixed with his own, distinctively male scent.

Yeah. Sydnie wanted to throw caution to the wind, all right. She wanted to feel the brush of his day's growth of whiskers against the hollow of her throat, against her breasts, against the length of her tummy, and ... ?

Stop it, Riley. It was so stupid of her to indulge in her fantasy and try on the lingerie here. Just what the hell had she been thinking?

She wasn't. And now look where it got her. On the verge of melting in the arms of the man she was supposed to despise.

Remembering she was scantily clad, she scowled and shoved out of his grasp. She backed her way to the bathroom, not wanting to give Trevor the pleasure of seeing her bare bottom any more tonight. Grabbing her white, fuzzy

robe off the hook on the door, she slipped it on and a semblance of security and strength surrounded her.

"So what are you doing here?" she managed to ask with censure as she stepped back into the office. "And how did you get in here? All the doors are locked. Did you break in?"

"I'm reporting in with the boss, like I was ordered to do. And for your information, I didn't break in. Terri gave me a key."

Super. Syd made a mental note to discuss with her business partners the possible pitfalls of handing out keys to the help prior to the end of the ninety-day probationary period.

He grinned wickedly and fingered the lapels of her robe. "I liked you better without this."

Sydney swore she could almost feel the heat of his touch all the way through the terrycloth. Oh, boy. The cliché, in way over her head, exploded in her mind.

She needed to be strong, very strong. She brushed away his hands. "I meant, you're supposed to report in during business hours."

"I saw your car in the lot and knew you were still working, so that counts as business hours, doesn't it? How was I to know you'd be—"

"Don't go there." She held up her hand. "I don't want to discuss what happened here tonight, ever again."

"All right. Your secret is safe with me." He shrugged. "I got checks." He pulled them out of his pocket and waved the slips of paper under her nose. "Sorry about the teeth marks on that one. I hope it'll go through the bank okay."

She eyed the torn check and for the first time noticed Trevor's jeans were ripped and his T-shirt had a good-sized tear on the right side of his chest as well. She saw the smooth tanned skin underneath and watched, mesmerized as his muscles flexed when he moved. Her breath caught. "What happened to you?"

"Come on, Syd. You don't have to ask that." He tapped the tip of her nose with his index finger.

"Yes, I do. What are you getting at?"

"You know all about this little game we're playing."

"Game?"

"Yeah. Game." Their gazes locked and held. He yanked on the tail of the belt of her robe. The garment fell open. He brushed the fabric off her shoulder, exposing her skin to the fever of his touch. Her heart pounded in a wild, almost primal, rhythm.

Trevor slipped a finger under the silky strap of her bra. With excruciating slowness, he slid his finger down the length of the strap, not stopping until he reached the swell of her breast. His touch hypnotized her in a way she never thought possible. It was almost as if he'd cast some sort of spell over her.

His gaze fell to her breasts. "That's quite a bra you've got there. Nice," he drawled. "Something new?"

"Yes." He brushed the robe off her other shoulder and it pooled at her feet.

Trevor's hands skated over her nipples, down her belly and to her hips, touching her skin just enough to leave an explosive fire trail in their wake.

With bewitching ease, his hands slipped under the thin band of her thong and cupped her hips. In one fluid motion, he pulled her hard up against him.

"Very nice," he said huskily as his hands cupped her derriere. "It's amazing what they can do with lingerie these days."

"Yes," she said with a breathy sigh. Sydnie's legs weakened and threatened to collapse at the feel of his hard thighs pressing against her. His fingers caressed her backside and sent a shiver of anticipation soaring to every erogenous zone in her body.

"Oh, Syd," he whispered against her throat.

Oh, Trevor. Is this what dying and going to Heaven felt like?

She gripped his arms to steady herself and was awed by the rock-hard solidness she found. A tinge of sweat dampened his skin and the urge to tangle with Trevor with nothing but sweat between them, consumed her senses.

He caressed her mouth with the tip of his tongue and tugged at the corner of her lips with his teeth. The teasing blew her mind and made her body flare with a desire she'd thought long suppressed.

How wrong she'd been. How very wrong.

She slid her arms around his neck. Trevor captured her lips with his own and their deep, ravenous hunger for each other shifted the momentum from gentle play to urgent, got-to-have-it-now need.

Sydnie felt her feet leave the floor as Trevor lifted and set her on the edge of the desk. The wood was cool and smooth

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

against her bare bottom. She wrapped her legs around his hips, cinching him up tight against her.

Her eagerness didn't go unrewarded. Trevor clenched and tugged at the strap of her bra, then pushed the satin off her shoulder and down her arm. His lips left hers to further explore the contours of her throat, then slowly he made his way to the top of her breast. Pushing aside the bra, he exposed her nipple to the moist heat of his mouth. Her breath caught. Lightning struck her core and she tunneled her fingers into his hair.

Demanding more, Trevor laid her down on the cluttered desk and a stack of paper whooshed to the floor. A container of pencils and pens spilled over onto the desk top, rolled and fell to the carpeting with a thud.

Sydney arched her back and reveled in the feel of his hands working their mystical magic on her body.

Her fingers brushed over his smooth skin exposed by the hole in his T-shirt. She grabbed the frayed fabric and ripped his shirt all the way down to his belly button. It made her feel wild, naughty and powerful.

She pressed her lips to his chest and the spattering of hair there tickled her nose. With her tongue she drew circles around his nipple and the salty spiciness made her hungry for more exotic flavors.

"Syd," he whispered against her ear. "You're goin' to be my undoing."

"Good," she panted.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

The sharp ring of a phone blasted in her ear, breaking the spell the soft music, the flickering candles and Stardust Lingerie had cast over them.

Sydney groaned.

It rang a second time.

Trevor groaned.

Sydney wanted to scream at the interruption. Why hadn't she thought to turn off the ringer? The phone rang a third time and Sydney lifted the phone and glanced at the caller ID through a passion-interrupted haze.

Uh-oh. "We'll ... have to ... finish this ... discussion later," she managed to say around Trevor's intoxicating kisses. She took a deep breath, desperate for oxygen. "I've got to take this call."

"Let the answering machine get it. You're busy," he said, just before his tongue tickled the tiny spot behind her ear. He took the phone from her hand and dropped it back on the desk.

Oh, Lord. Sydney wanted to cave in, tumble to the floor and let Trevor have his way with her, and she have her way with him, but her sensible side took hold. "No." She shook her head and pressed her palms against his chest. "You don't understand. It's my dad. You don't just let the machine get it when he calls."

The answering machine clicked in with the after hour's message and beeped. "Syd. This is your father calling. What are you doing? Pick up the phone. I know you're there."

Shit. If her father knew what she was doing at this very moment, he'd split a gut.

"You're mother went by the office not more than ten minutes ago and saw your car. Now pick up."

"Look. I've got to take this." With major effort she shoved Trevor away and quickly found out she didn't like the sudden loss of his warm body next to hers. "We'll finish this ... conversation later."

"Later? As in later this evening?"

"Sydney! Answer the damn phone!" her dad bellowed.

"Ah, I don't know, Trevor." She snatched her robe off the floor and slipped it on, knowing there was no way she could talk to her dad while wearing almost nothing. She jerked the receiver off its cradle and bonked her cheek with it. "Hello, Daddy."

"What was that noise?"

"Ah, nothing."

"What the hell took so long?"

"I'm sorry. I was in the bathroom," she said with a slight tremble in her voice.

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine. You sound winded."

"I ran to the phone."

"Huh. Maybe you ought to install a phone in the bathroom, too. You've got everything else in there."

"Sure. Whatever you say. Hold on a sec, dad, would ya?" She cupped the receiver. "Tomorrow," she whispered to Trevor.

"What? You can't be serious?" Trevor mumbled. "You can't do this to me, Syd. It's criminal."

"Sorry." She shrugged. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sydney? What's going on? Is someone there with you?" her dad asked.

"No. I just turned down the stereo." She plunked in her chair and spun around, hoping Trevor would get the hint and leave without getting madder than hell at her for brushing him off so easily.

Of course he deserved to. And she deserved to be madder than hell at herself for doing it.

* * * *

Terri jogged along the graveled park trail, her trusty friend and companion, Thomas O' Malley, securely strapped in his kitty carrier on her back.

Dusk was fast approaching so Terri picked up the pace a notch, not wanting to be caught in the park after dark. Thomas loved to jog more than Terri did, and protested loudly by meowing for hours if she didn't take him out for their evening jaunt. Sitting at home with her feet up on the coffee table and a bowl of popcorn in her lap, like she'd planned after a long day at the office, was out of the question until Thomas got to go for his run.

Of course, he jogged via Terri's back, never setting a paw on the ground. No wonder he liked to go so much. He didn't have to exert himself, yet got his required amount of fresh air for the day, and a fine view of the geese fighting over breadcrumbs tossed out by park goers.

"Must be rough to be so spoiled," Terri said between breaths as she made her way up a small incline. Thomas

meowed in his typical smug response. "Yeah, buddy, let me tell, ya. It's time you did some spoilin' back."

But as far as Terri was concerned, Thomas was worth his weight in Fancy Feast for not only the companionship he gave, but the security as well. While jogging, she never worried about someone coming up behind her unexpectedly. Thomas was always on guard and let her know with a vicious hiss when someone approached. Between Thomas and the can of pepper spray in her pocket, she felt reasonably safe.

And for a cat, he made a better watch dog for her apartment than a slobbering canine. His keen sense of alertness always told her when something was wrong, and he had a fetish for pouncing on anyone he thought didn't belong there. And that included the few-and-far-between boyfriends Terri had brought home. After one ambush by Thomas, they declared she had a psycho cat and left, scratched and bleeding, for the emergency room.

It always embarrassed and aggravated her that a cat had a say so in her choice of would-be lovers. But later, after she'd learned the guy had done time, or had a bad habit of driving off with cars that he didn't own, she was thankful her feline was smarter than she was when it came to men.

Terri stumbled and Thomas meowed his dissatisfaction. "Sorry, buddy. That damn shoelace is untied again." She took a few more steps before stopping near a bench and knelt down to tie the lace.

"Listen, *Charles*. She has to be handled with kid gloves," a deep voice said from behind a tall hedge of Bridal Veil bushes.

Terri's hands stilled, intrigued by the tone of the conversation drifting on the evening breeze.

"Look," the voice continued. "I need more time. This isn't an easy thing to do."

Easy? What wasn't easy? She crouched lower behind the bushes and kept her fingers crossed Thomas didn't start to meow and give away their presence. He wasn't known for being patient when their jog came to an unexpected halt. He'd only sit still so long before he started to howl like a sick cow.

"Look. I told you. If we want to get anything out of her, I've got to go slow or else she'll figure out what's up."

Terri's pulse quickened. Did she, whoever she was, owe this guy money? Were they planning a heist of some kind?

And that voice. That voice sounded so familiar. But who...? She scanned her memory, but couldn't place it.

"I know. I know. Time is short. I've got to deliver," the man said with a hard tone. "But if I'm not careful, she'll kick me out on my ass, and we'll be S-O-L."

Was he talking about a drug deal? She wished she could hear the other side of the conversation, then she'd know for sure. And she wished she could place that voice. It would bug her all night if she didn't find out who this mystery man was.

Totally caught up in this moment of intrigue, Terri pulled aside a branch and tried to see through the hedge, but it was impossible. The foliage was too thick, and the encroaching darkness made it tough to make out anything more than a man's bare leg. And a very muscular one at that.

"You've got to stall him," the man continued. "I need more time to finish the job."

Finish the job? Murder?! She swallowed hard. Was she hearing the one-sided plot of a murder?

Visions of fearing for her life as she waited to testify at the murder trial filled her mind. She wrapped her fingers around her pepper spray. *Yeah, right. As if a can of pepper spray is going to save me from a bullet with my name on it.*

This was nonsense. Her imagination was getting carried away. It was probably some kind of legitimate business deal, or problem with a divorce.

She really needed to stop watching so many crime shows.

Convinced she wasn't in danger, she braved stealing a peek over the top of the hedge. The gravel shifted beneath her feet and she lost her balance, landing on her backside. "Humph!"

Thomas screeched as if his tail were being sucked up by a vacuum cleaner.

"Sshhh!" she whispered, and yanked Thomas's carrier around to the front of her and stroked his furry head to keep him quiet.

The scuffle of a man's shoe sounded on the opposite side of the hedge. She froze. Her heart thumped in her throat. Her imagination took wing. What if the guy discovered her hiding in the shrubs and had to take her out, too?

Oh, God! She held her breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and prayed. Being found murdered in the park, dressed in her ugly grey sweats, and a cat strapped to her body, was not her idea of a great way to go.

"Nothing's wrong," the man said. "Just a couple of cats gettin' it on in the hedge."

Cats gettin' it on? Terri's eyes popped open and a wave of relief rushed through her at the man's mistaken conclusion.

Thank you, Lord. He didn't suspect her presence.

Trying to calm her hammering heart, she took a deep breath and inhaled and exhaled slowly, then picked herself up off her butt and kneeled. The pebbly roughness of the gravel bit into her skin. Craning her neck once more, she peeked over the hedge. By gosh she wasn't going through all of this without at least knowing who was plotting her murder not more than six feet away from her.

The man, his back to her, gripped his cell phone with one hand, the other firmly planted on his lean hip. Broad shoulders pulled at the seams of his muscle shirt. He wore black jogging shorts, revealing legs that rivaled Sean Connery's during his Bond days.

Her mouth watered. There was only one man she knew who was built like this.

And that was Trevor Vanden Bosch.

See. You were all worked up over nothing. Drugs? Murder? Ha! Not Trevor. She'd simply jumped to the wrong conclusions.

"I know they're our biggest account," Trevor said with exasperation in his voice. "I'm doing the best I can."

Biggest account? Was Trevor working for someone else besides Studs for Hire? The gals didn't have any clients they could lump into that category yet.

A dead silence hung in the air as he waited on the line. Terri suppressed a groan as the pain from kneeling shot through her legs. Her muscles began to ache, and Thomas fidgeted.

"All right. I'll be there ... Yeah, yeah, I'll be ready." Trevor hung up the phone and slipped it into his pocket. "Damn," he bit out. He raked his fingers through his hair. "Sorry, Syd."

Sorry, Syd? As in Sydney? Trevor was working for a competitor.

He glanced around as if to make sure he was still alone. Terri ducked, hoping he didn't see her. She'd hate to have to admit she was eavesdropping on his conversation. Explaining her way out of awkward situations was not her forte.

"Terri? Terri, is that you?"

Terri jumped out of her skin, lost her balance and fell over backwards. "Oops!" So much for not getting caught. Thomas stared down at her and she could've sworn he rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Are you all right?" Trevor asked.

"Ah, yeah." She scrambled into a sitting position and forced a smile.

"What are you doing?" Was that a hint of suspicion she saw etched in his eyes?

"I'm ... jogging."

"Jogging is pretty hard to do sitting on your duff."

Yikes. He did suspect something. Like it or not, she was going to have to bluff her way out of this mess.

"I was jogging, but my shoe came untied. So I stopped to tie it. You startled me."

"Sorry. I was afraid you were hurt. Let me help you." He extended his hand, but she ignored his offer. If she touched him, she'd never be able to keep her secret. Men had a magical way of making her say anything and everything that was on her mind when they touched her.

"No. No." She scrambled to her feet and brushed off her backside. "I'm fine. Just shoelace trouble." She shook her left foot. "Silly thing is always coming lose. I need to buy some new ones."

"It's kind of late for you to be out jogging, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Normally I run earlier than this, but I worked late. And Thomas here won't let a day go by without his run. Except for Sundays. He lets me take Sundays off." She watched as Trevor's gaze drifted lower to the proximity of her chest. Her cheeks warmed.

"A cat? You jog with a cat?" She heard the disbelief in his voice. And she couldn't help feel a little disappointed that he was looking at her cat and not her, well...

"Thomas loves it. He's great protection, too." At the moment, Thomas didn't appear to care about providing her with any form of protection. He didn't hiss. He didn't meow. He just twitched his tail in miffed annoyance. Terri shifted her weight from one foot to the other, suddenly feeling like a babbling idiot who had nothing to talk about.

"Well, attack cat, or not. It's getting too dark for you to be in the park alone. Where's your car parked? I'll walk with you."

"You don't have to do that."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"I insist." The clipped tone of his voice told her he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"It's over the rise and around the next bend."

"Let's go."

"Right." Terri fell into step beside him and hoped she could find something reasonably intelligent to say.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trevor slammed his apartment door and headed straight for the shower. Turning the faucet to cold, he took two seconds to shed his jogging clothes and step under the freezing spray, and gasped from the shock.

If the iciness of the shower didn't get this blazing need for Sydnie Riley out of his system—at least for the night—nothing would. Taking a quick jog through the park hadn't even come close to calming his libido, so an ice cube shower was next on his list of things to try.

Needless to say, that latest phone call from Smythe, interrupting his jog, only managed to add to Trevor's frustrations. Smythe had called to goad him, and remind him Mars would be in the office first thing in the morning. As if Trevor needed reminding.

Concentrating on how to advertise the Venus Bra was his priority right now, not how best to get the sexy, provocative thing off of Sydnie. But undressing her, skimming his hands over her curves and making sweet love to her, was *all* he could think about.

He'd come so close. So damn close to having her right where he wanted her, in more ways than one. The gift of lingerie had worked like a charm—maybe a little too well—and then, wham! Her dad's phone call ruined the whole scene.

Now, Trevor was in pain.

And he was quickly realizing his feelings for Sydnie ran deeper than he originally thought. All those months of

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

working by her side at Smythe and Jones he'd told himself it was only lust between them. But he knew now he'd been kidding himself.

He slammed his fist against the shower wall.

The ache plaguing his body wasn't from the hard work he'd done today, or from his urgent leap over the fence. No. He ached with a craving for a stubborn and sexy redhead. Trevor squeezed a dab of shampoo into his palm and worked the liquid into a lather over his scalp. He scrubbed as though washing his hair would rid his body of all the heat searing desire burning him up like a man with Scarlet fever.

But it wasn't working.

The frigid water, his numb scalp, and the pressure from his boss did nothing to subdue his longing for Sydnie.

"You got it bad, bro," he mumbled.

For crying out loud. He was acting like a school kid lusting after the cheerleading squad. Where was the seasoned, professional Vanden Bosch he'd worked so carefully for years to mold to perfection?

"Gone. Down the drain." Disgusted, he shut off the water, grabbed a big fluffy bath-towel and tied it off around his waist. Water dripping, he strolled to the kitchen and snatched a bottle of beer out of the fridge. Twisting the top off as he walked, he made his way to the living room where he'd set up a drawing board and computer so he could work in the not so comfortable atmosphere of his barren apartment.

Bringing his work home, slaving away until the wee hours of the morning, all for a boss who only cared about lining his own pockets and not that of his employees, was ludicrous.

That was bovine dedication for you.

He took a long swallow and wondered if a drunken stupor would be enough to curb his compulsion for a woman that he couldn't have, and turn his thoughts in the direction of work. He had to come up with some out-of-this world ideas for an ad campaign or he was doomed.

But he knew alcohol wasn't the answer and he'd only end up in the morning with a hangover and a pink slip if he wasn't careful.

He turned on the computer, downed another swallow, then made his way back to the bedroom to dry off and put some clothes on while the computer booted up.

Dressed in a pair of old blue jeans, Trevor sat down at the drawing board and went to work.

Three hours and stacks of discarded papers later, he was no closer to having a suitable campaign to present to Mars than he was when he sat down. He combed his fingers through his hair and groaned.

Trevor was hungry, tired and cranky. Maybe he should grab something to eat. It wasn't easy to work on an empty, growling stomach. He glanced at the clock and decided he was too lazy to cook at this hour.

Maybe he should go to bed and forget it all. No. He'd regret that decision come nine o'clock in the morning when Mars strode into Trevor's office and expected to see ad layouts he didn't have.

What he really needed was someone to help him brainstorm, to toss around ideas around with, see if he was on track or headed off on a ridiculous tangent. He glanced at

the clock on his work table again. The beaming red numbers pronounced the two a.m. hour, far too late to call anyone.

Anyone that is, except Syd.

Sydnie's ideas were what he needed, why he'd gone undercover at Studs for Hire in the first place. She was the one Mars wanted to launch the Venus Bra into the universe. And Mars always insisted upon getting what he wanted.

Besides, Sydnie deserved to have her slumber disturbed. A wee hour morning call would be her punishment for leaving him hard as a rock earlier that night.

He grabbed the phone and punched in Sydnie's home number before he could change his mind. The phone rang six times and a sleepy voice came on the line. "Hel ... lo."

"Mornin', Syd."

"Trevor?"

"Yeah, it's me."

She yawned and the raspy sound of her breathing on the other end of the line made him think of things he'd been trying like hell to forget. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong. I've got exactly seven hours to come up with a major ad campaign to present to Alfred Mars and I haven't got a damn thing. All I can think about is you.

"Are you all right?" she asked, a hint of concern in her voice. The rustle of bedding whispered over the line and his imagination took hold. He envisioned her wearing absolutely nothing beneath those sheets. Nothing but the glistening perspiration from their bodies after sharing passionate, mind-blowing sex. He groaned. He should have known calling her

would only end up torturing him more. "It's two in the morning."

"I couldn't ... sleep." He scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Oh? I didn't know you suffered from insomnia," she said with a soft giggle.

"I don't," he bit out, knowing exactly what she implied. So, she thought leaving him all hot and bothered was funny. Terrific.

Sydney Riley was beating him at his own game. And he'd better come up with some new defensive strategies, or this quarter was going to belong to her.

He was the one who was supposed to be in control here and do the seducing. But no, he had to let his appetite get the better of him, and in turn, give Sydney the opportunity to jerk him around like a sex-starved puppet.

From now on, he was getting down to business. No more games where he came out the loser. Time to go to work.

Boy, was she in for a surprise.

"That ... was really hot ... lingerie you had on earlier," he said huskily. "I liked it."

The silence coming from the other end of the line was downright deafening. Super. So much for taking control of his desperate situation.

"You looked fantastic," he added, hoping he'd evoke some kind of response. "Do you always wear—"

"I don't normally dress that way," she said, interrupting him. "Or behave like that. I've been putting in a lot of overtime lately. The wine went to my head."

"That's good."

"Good?"

"I'm glad you took my R & R advice. It doesn't hurt to let loose once in a while. Will you do it again? For me, Syd?" Trevor smiled, knowing Sydnie couldn't help but blush at his suggestion. "I'll even buy the bra and thong this time. Where did you get it?"

"It was a gift," she said tersely. Okay, she was getting defensive. He'd expected that.

"Oh? Boyfriend?"

"No. Yes. Not exactly," she sputtered.

"I see." His mouth curved into an unconscious smile. "So, who did you get the gift from?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Sorry. I'm curious is all."

"Didn't you recognize the distinctive style?" He heard suspicion in her silky, smooth voice. Was she testing him? Ah, Sydnie. Always the challenger. She did so love to lock horns with him.

"Should I?"

"Yes, you should. They were your favorite account. *You know, lingerie fashioned for the universe,*" she recited part of a slogan they'd slaved over for hours.

"Stardust," he drawled. "I always knew they were the best. Seeing you in one of Alfred's Celestial creations proves it."

"If you didn't know whose bra it is, how do you know it's a part of the Celestial line?"

Damn. Slip number one. "Lucky guess," he said quickly. "Besides, the last two campaigns we worked on together were for that line." Silence greeted him once more. Trevor

suspected the wheels were turning away in that pretty head of hers—trying to decide if she should believe him or not.

"What planet is he using this time?" he asked, hoping to get her on the right track.

"Venus."

"Ah, Venus. The goddess of love and beauty," he said smoothly.

"The brightest star in the sky," she countered.

"Venus De Milo, the revealing statue of Aphrodite."

"It's also the second planet from the sun."

"Venus Liberentina, patroness of sensual pleasure."

"Venus Verticordia, protector of female chastity."

Trevor gritted his teeth. So much for getting her to cooperate. How was he supposed to get ideas to advertise sexy, provocative intimate apparel when she insisted upon countering his every sentence? "I see you know your mythology," he said a little harsher than he intended.

"Some. I studied up when I was working to snag the Stardust account. Alfred appreciated my thoroughness."

That wasn't all Mars appreciated, Trevor thought dryly. "Speaking of Alfred. I take it he was the one who sent you the lingerie and the flowers?"

"What makes you think it was him?"

"Well, for starters, the Venus Bra isn't even on the market yet. And Mars was the only one I ever knew of to send you tropical flowers."

"How do you know the Venus Bra isn't on the market?" she asked with wariness in her voice.

Oops. Screw up number two. *Think fast, Vanden Bosch.*
"Because. We hadn't worked on an ad campaign for Stardust since you left the agency. And the last project you and I did for Mars, was the Luna Torsolette."

Again, silence hung between them. What was she doing, computing each one of his words through her brain? Or had she fallen asleep? He'd really be in trouble if he'd talked her to sleep.

The countdown to lingerie doomsday thrummed in his head. Time to try another tactic.

"Remember that torsolette, Syd? The sheer lace. The deep plunging neckline. The low, low back," he whispered. "And garter belts. God, how I love garter belts. My favorite part is unhooking them." Trevor swallowed hard. Damn, he was getting all hot-and-bothered again. And he wondered if he was having the same affect on Sydnie.

"I remember. Available in Moon Glow Silver, Starry Night Blue and Galaxy Black," her voice faded to a soft hush.

Trevor smiled. At last she was responding to him. "Starry Night Blue. You don't know how many times I dreamed of seeing you in Starry Night Blue." Visions of Syd in that sheer, dark blue lace engulfed his mind.

The warmth of her satiny skin and the feel of her tempestuous curves still lingered on his fingertips from earlier that night. He took a deep breath and the memory of the spiciness in her hair aroused his senses.

"You did?"

"Oh, yeah. And just as many times I dreamed of releasing those hooks-and-eyes holding it in place. I wanted you so much, Syd, it hurt."

"Do you ... still?" she asked with a sultriness in her voice that tempted him to grab his car keys and race over to her apartment.

"I think you know the answer to that."

"Do I?"

"Yes. But if you need proof, we could pick up where we left off tonight."

"Trevor ... I..." she sighed. "I think we need to take a step back here. Give this some time."

"Sure. We can take it one long kiss at a time."

"Trevor," she took a deep breath. He envisioned her shaking her head. "It's too soon. I'm not ready to put my heart on the line with you again. I don't think I could survive you walking away from me a second time."

Trevor's gut twisted at the truth of her words. If only she knew how much walking away had hurt him, too. How paralyzed he'd been after she'd left. He'd barely functioned in the rigors of day-to-day society. And when he walked through the door of his apartment at night, the pain increased tenfold. So he took up jogging and pushed his body to the maximum in an effort to banish the numbness of his soul.

But nothing ever worked completely.

Then Smythe had offered him a proposition: Go undercover at Studs, get Sydnie's ideas, become a partner in the agency, and if all worked out right, get the girl, too.

Although Trevor had disagreed with Smythe's tactic to steal Sydnie's ideas, he'd jumped at the opportunity to be near her once more.

He was being given a second chance to have Sydnie in his life. He wouldn't screw it up like last time. But getting the girl at the end of this show, would no doubt be the biggest challenge of his life. He wished there was some other way to handle this.

"Sure, Sydnie. I understand. We'll take it slow. See where things go."

"Yeah, see where things go," she said softly.

"Look. It's really late. I've kept you awake long enough. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Trevor."

"Goodnight." There was a pause and he hoped she'd change her mind and ask him to come over, but then he heard the click on the line. Slowly he put the receiver back in its cradle. "Sweet dreams, Syd."

* * * *

Sydnie hung up the phone and tried to regain control of her ragged breathing and her pounding heart. Flinging herself back on the pillows, she covered her face with her hands. What the heck was going on here? When did this situation with Trevor get so out-of-hand?

"The minute he walked through my door, that's when," she grumbled in the darkness. "Vanden Bosch knows exactly what buttons of yours to push, and you're letting him push 'em. You're weak, Syd. Damn weak."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Just because the guy looked a lot like Mel Gibson, and had a sexy voice to match, didn't mean she should forget about the past and fall at his feet as if he was Elvis.

There was a lot of hurt between them that needed to be righted, and questions that needed to be answered. So far he hadn't offered those answers, and in fact, acted as though there weren't any wrongs to right.

Trevor was using his attributes to get under her skin.

And he was succeeding.

"Ugh! I had a weak moment, I swear!" She sat up and grabbed a pillow and punched its middle. "Okay, maybe a couple two, or three."

But how could a girl not have weak moments when a man whispered in her ear how much he'd dreamed about removing her underwear? She cuddled the pillow in her arms and rested her chin on its downy softness. An unruly curl flopped in her face and she blew it back into place.

Worst part of it was, she knew what Trevor felt like. She knew intimately the texture of his skin, the solidness of his muscles, and the musky scent of him. She knew the commanding force of his smooth lips, the wicked taste of his tongue.

She knew what it felt like to be in his arms, his body pressed next hers.

She knew too darn much.

But there was one aspect of Trevor she didn't know. And that was how it would feel to make total, uninhibited love with him. Butterflies skittered in her tummy at the thought.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

She curled onto her side, hugging the pillow to her breast like a desperately needed security blanket.

"Syd, you're in a real pickle here."

* * * *

Sydney glanced at her watch and hurried into the office. She was running way behind this morning.

Chalk it up to a lack of sleep.

Once she'd finally left the office last night after her dangerous encounter with Trevor, and went home to bed, all she managed to do was toss and turn for hours, reliving all that had transpired between them. Then, when she'd finally fallen asleep, Trevor called, and with his sexy talk about lingerie, she started her tossing and turning all over again.

And what a phone conversation they'd had. Just thinking about it, even in the bright morning light, made her feverish. Not a good sign.

This predicament with Trevor was making her heart race, her head throb, and her stomach ache.

Was she ready to take a chance again? Ready to risk her heart when she knew all too well how it felt to have it broken in two?

Sydney entered the office and saw both Terri and Casey hovering over a computer. Knowing they would razz her terribly about being late, she walked on by without so much as a word, hoping they wouldn't notice her arrival. Her office door stood a mere four feet away. Almost home free.

"Glad you decided to come to work today," Casey said.

Sydney stopped in her tracks. Her head fell back and she sighed. Her muscles tightened at the prospect of a zillion questions bound to be flung her way. She loved her friends, and any other time she'd tell them everything.

But not this. Not yet. Trevor was a different kind of dilemma that for some reason, she felt compelled to handle on her own.

Sydney turned and read the expectant looks on both of her friends faces. "I got out of here late last night. I needed to catch some extra sleep." She headed into her office, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

"You're stressed, Syd," Casey said as she and Terri made themselves comfortable on Syd's couch.

So much for hope.

"I thought one of the ideas behind starting our own business was to relieve the day-to-day pressures we'd all been facing," Terri said.

"Eventually, yes," Syd answered. "But, we've been in the corporate world long enough to know that any new business takes a ton of work to get it going and make it successful."

"True. But you're one of the bosses," Casey said. "You need to play a little. And by the look of the crow's feet developing at the corners of your eyes, I'd say you're more stressed than ever. Maybe you should try Botox."

"Stick needles all over in your face?!" Terri shuddered. "I hate shots. I cry when Thomas O'Malley gets his rabies shot."

"It's a tiny needle, you hardly feel a thing," Casey said.

"No way. That's not for me," Terri said. "You should take up jogging, Syd. Now that's a good, healthy way to relieve stress."

Syd shook her head. "Jogging gives me the hives," she said sarcastically.

"Too, bad. If you were a jogger, you could go with Trevor," Terri said.

"Trevor jogs?" Syd asked, a little surprised. But then she shouldn't be. She'd made enough contact with his muscles last night to know the man was in excellent shape.

"Sure does. He's got a great pair of legs, too," Terri said with awe.

"How do you know that?" Syd asked. A tinge of jealousy reared its ugly head, and the idea that she was feeling this way made her more than a little mad.

"He was wearing jogging shorts."

"No. No. I mean, how do you know he jogs?"

"Because I ran into him in the park last night. Well, I didn't actually run into him. It was more like I stumbled across him as he was talking on his cell phone."

"Stumbled?" Casey quirked a finely plucked brow. "What was he doing, lying in the middle of the jogging path?"

"Of course not. He was ... well, okay. I admit it." Terri threw up her hands. "I eavesdropped. A little." Her cheeks flushed with color.

"Tsk, ts, ts." Casey wiggled her index finger at Terri. "Didn't your mama teach you any manners?"

"Sure she did. But I couldn't help but overhear. I had to stop and tie my shoe. And he was saying some weird stuff

and I had to listen. I thought maybe he was involved in a drug deal or something. And then it sounded like he was plotting a murder."

"What?!" Sydney and Casey asked in unison.

"Terri, you've been watching too many crime shows again," Casey admonished. "What did he say to give you such a wild idea?"

"Several things."

"And those were?" Syd asked.

"Well. He kept saying things like, 'she has to be handled with kid gloves, I need more time, this isn't easy,'" she said in a low, gruff voice. "And, he said if he wanted to get anything out of her, he had to go slow."

"Sounds to me like he's trying to score," Casey said. She gave Sydnie a knowing look and smiled.

Sydnie brushed off her friend's silent suggestion. "Did you catch who he was talking to, Terri?"

"Let me think. He did say a name, but..." Terri's brow furrowed in deep thought.

"But what? What was it?!"

"Ohhh, I can't remember. It was something stuffy like Clive, Clarence, no wait! Charles, the name was Charles."

"Charles?!" Sydnie gasped. Suspicion hit her anew. There was only one Charles she knew that insisted he be called by his formal name. But what would Trevor be doing talking to him? Trevor had said he'd been fired from Smythe and Jones. "Did you catch a last name?"

"No, I didn't. But Trevor sounded really frustrated, almost desperate even."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Sydney plunked down in her chair and steepled her fingers. So, she'd been right all along. Trevor was after something—what or why she wasn't exactly sure—but she'd bet the business Charles Smythe was behind it.

And last night? Last night was all a part of the scheme.

"Syd? What is it?" Casey asked. "You look like you've just been told you can never eat chocolate again."

"Ladies." Syd stood and braced her hands on the desktop. "We've got a rat in our midst."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trevor entered his office to find Mars already waiting for him. Charles Smythe was nowhere to be seen. Wonderful. Smythe was leaving Trevor to hang all on his own. That was Smythe for you. The snake.

Trevor took a deep breath, shoved aside his lack of sleep and put his best foot forward. The future of the Stardust Lingerie account hung on this moment.

"Morning, Alfred." Trevor extended his hand. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Mars unfolded his tall frame out of the posh, overstuffed leather chair and accepted the gesture. "Morning, Vanden Bosch." He pushed back his blazer and placed a very large, very dangerous looking hand on his hip. Under the man's hard gaze, Trevor felt sort of like a toothpick which could easily be snapped in two.

"Where's Sydnie? She will be joining us, won't she?" The insistence in Mars's voice was loud and clear. Damn Smythe for forcing Trevor into this web of deceit. Smythe should have done the right thing in the very beginning and told Mars the truth—that Sydnie no longer worked here.

But no. Dishonesty was the best policy in Smythe's business world. And the worst part of it was, the weasel always left the smoothing things over work to his employees.

Trevor moved behind the desk, putting a sturdy barrier between him and Mars. Trevor was no weakling, but he was smart enough to keep his distance from the former wrestler

who still took his weight training regime very seriously. "I'm sorry, Alfred. Sydnie is unable to be here this morning."

"Again?" Mars's eyes narrowed, his shoulders stiffened. "Is there a problem?"

"No problem. She just hasn't returned from her grandmother's yet."

"I see. Well, in spite of her absence, you do have some ideas for me to look at?" he asked with an impatient edge in his voice.

Trevor rounded up his grit and prepared to lie once more to the man who spent millions of dollars with Smythe and Jones on advertising. Telling him the truth was what Trevor wanted to do, but Smythe would have his job, his paycheck, and his head for coming clean.

Damn, he hated lying. It wasn't his style. But in the years since he started at the agency, it seemed as though he'd done more than his fair share, and as far as Trevor could see, he wasn't going to be able to stop telling tall-tales anytime soon.

He'd rehearsed his little concocted speech a dozen times on his way into the office this morning, but now that the moment was at hand, he could barely remember a single word of it. To say that Mars's stature was intimidating, was an understatement. They didn't call him the God of War in the wrestling world just because his last name was Mars.

"I'm sorry, Alfred. I'm afraid the layouts aren't quite ready."

"Why? What's the delay? Every day we aren't promoting the Venus Bra is one more day I'm losing money and losing

ground to the competition. I hired you to put me together an advertising campaign, not excuses."

"I realize that, and I apologize for the delay. But ... with Sydnie away, we're running a little behind. Just give me a few more days, and I promise I'll have something for you." Trevor suppressed a groan. He hated making promises he wasn't sure he could keep.

"I want to talk to Sydnie, see what she's thinking."

"That's not possible."

"Why not?"

"She can't be reached."

"I don't buy that. This is the twenty-first century, Vanden Bosch. Nobody can live without their cell phone or e-mail anymore. Those gadgets are like bread and water to a modern day society."

"True. But Sydnie asked that we not contact her."

"Why? What's going on? Are you hiding something?" Mars's eyes narrowed to slits and he leaned forward. "She didn't run off and get married, did she?"

"No. Of course not. Her grandmother has a very delicate condition. Syd didn't want to bring any distractions into her home." Trevor hoped Mars was buying this load of crap because that's exactly what it sounded like to his own ears. Crap.

"Good. I'd hate to see my girl run off and marry somebody else."

My girl? Trevor bristled. Since when was Sydnie Mars's girl? Last night she'd responded to Trevor's touch as if she could never be anyone else's girl but his.

But what if Syd and Mars were involved and he'd failed to see it? He sure as hell hoped not, or his lingerie gift would blow the top of this charade, and his quest to win her heart, if he didn't move fast.

"I'm in communication with Sydnie every day," Trevor said, hoping he sounded convincing, even though, for once he was telling the man the truth. "We've been bouncing ideas back forth via phone. By the way, when was the last time you talked to Syd, Alfred?"

"A couple months ago. We went out to dinner after we wrapped up the final touches on the launch of the Celestial line."

Trevor breathed a sigh of relief. Good. He was safe, at least for now. But if Mars tired of Trevor's excuses, he wouldn't hesitate to track Sydnie down and all hell would break loose. Even more reason to finish up this campaign as quickly as possible.

"What difference does it make to you?" Mars crossed his muscular arms and scowled. "You got a problem with me taking Sydnie out for dinner?"

"No. None at all," Trevor covered quickly. In truth, Trevor had a really big problem with it. Syd didn't belong with a mogul like Mars, but he reined in his jealous streak. Who Sydnie chose to go out with was none of his concern. Not yet anyway.

"You two aren't...?" Mars asked as he gestured back and forth between him and Syd's imaginary presence.

Trevor longed to stake his claim, make it clear to Mars that Sydnie was off limits and that she belonged with him. But he had no right. No right at all.

"Dating amongst co-workers isn't allowed." Chalk up another lie. Dating among fellow employees was not only allowed, the boss practiced the drill himself. Coming up with a good fabrication was becoming second nature for Trevor.

And he hated that part of what he'd become.

"Too, bad for you, Vanden Bosch." Mars gave him a smug look that said, *na, na, na na, na*.

Trevor tamped down another surge of jealousy and anger. This was business. He needed to stay in professional mode. "As soon as we have the ideas for the Venus Bra laid out, I'll give you a call." He headed for the door, hoping Mars would take the hint and follow.

"I'm getting the feeling you're brushing me off here, Vanden Bosch."

Was it that obvious? Trevor put on a smile as he opened the door. "No, not at all. Sorry if it appears that way. My calender is booked tight today. I've got another appointment in a few minutes."

Mars sauntered toward him. "I'm flying out to Jackson Hole for the weekend for a little R & R. I'll be back in Omaha on Tuesday. I'll expect to see those layouts."

"They'll be ready."

"Make sure that they are," Mars said with a tone that bucked no argument. He strode down the marbled hallway and toward the elevator.

Trevor waited until Mars disappeared behind the polished brass doors, then took a deep breath and loosened his strangling tie. Whew! He'd made it through another challenge by the skin of his teeth.

With no assistance from his boss, either. Smythe. The jerk. This whole mess was really making Trevor open his eyes and see the obvious. How could he have ignored the truth for so long of what kind of person Smythe really was? Of course, underhanded practices were common place in the corporate business world anymore. And if a guy wanted to climb the proverbial ladder of success, he had to look the other way, not ask questions, and learn to play the game. Or be benched.

For a lot years Trevor that thought was exactly what he wanted. But he wasn't so sure anymore.

He opened his closet door and pulled out a pair of faded blue jeans and a grey T-shirt. He ran his hands over the cottony soft denim. That is where he could find a good, honest day's work, at Studs for Hire.

The idea of going to work in jeans and a T-shirt rather than a stuffy business suit, appealed to him more every day. Jeans were comfortable, durable, homey. And they symbolized the backbone of this country. Blue jeans represented the average, down-to-earth working man who made this nation strong. Trevor could feel his yearnings for success shifting to become a part of that backbone. There was more to life than cocktail parties, overpriced cars, belonging to the right class and knowing which fork to use.

Besides, Syd liked the way jeans hugged his backside. She'd deny it, but he'd caught her sizing him up on more than one occasion. And the glint in her eyes said she liked what she saw.

Trevor on the other hand would like Syd in even a potato sack. These days, she was the only boss he wanted to shmooze with.

* * * *

"So after putting two & two together, I'm positive Trevor is still working for Smythe and Jones," Syd said, then took a spoonful of her vanilla chocolate swirl waffle cone.

Knowing this tell-all session called for an emergency run to the nearest TCBY, the girls piled into Sydnie's yellow Torino and took off. Now, after spending the last fifteen minutes filling Casey and Terri in on all the details of her and Trevor's past association, and the real reason she'd left the ad agency, she felt angry. The whole ordeal was too painful to talk about even though all the self-help books claimed letting pent up angers and frustrations go, were supposed to be therapeutic, as if lifting an imaginary weight off one's shoulders.

Only Sydnie felt more like she'd been buried under a rock slide. Life could be so cruel. Just when you thought you could trust someone, wham! They slapped you in the face.

The prospective hurt of being betrayed a second time by Trevor stung too deep to even contemplate.

Sydnie jabbed her spoon into the remaining yogurt in the cone. She thought she was smart enough to learn after the first time Trevor duped her. But no. She had to let it happen

all over again just because she couldn't keep her desires in check.

And now, she was faced with a new, even bigger dilemma. What was she going to do about Trevor this time? This time, walking away wasn't an option.

"But I don't get it. Why would he still be working for Smythe and Jones if he's working for us?" Terri asked.

"He's obviously after something."

"Like what?" Casey asked. "Money? You to be the mother of his child? Or just plain ol' sex?"

"That's crazy," Syd huffed and stuck her tongue out at Casey before taking a chunk out of her cone.

"Is it really so crazy? You admitted things got pretty hot between you two before you left Smythe and Jones. Maybe Trevor's discovered he can't live without you after all. Could be that he wants to pick up where you left off, on the top of his desk?" She licked the last of the yogurt off her red spoon and smiled.

Sydney choked at her friends reasoning. They *had* picked up where they'd left off, only this time it was on the top of her desk.

"I'm not sure what he wants. But that part of our relationship, what there was of it, is over," Syd said in an effort to convince herself more than her friends.

"Really? Stop kidding yourself, Syd. A man doesn't look at a woman the way Trevor looks at you and not feel something for her. He wants you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Casey." Heat pricked at Syd's cheeks. She pushed back her chair, tossed their napkins in the trash

and strode toward the door, ready to forget all her Trevor problems.

"Why deny it?" Terri asked as they walked to Syd's car. "Trevor is hot. Why not make the most of it?"

"Because!" Sydnie whirled around to face her friends. "Being a hunk isn't the only thing that makes a guy Mr. Right."

"True," Casey chimed in. "He's got to be a great lover, too." Casey and Terri smiled and nodded their heads.

"Stop it! Both of you." Sydnie shook a scolding finger at them. "Trevor Vanden Bosch made a fool out of me. He used me!" Sydnie pulled her keys out of her purse and struggled to hold her hand steady enough to unlock the car door. "I won't go down that road again. Once is enough. Dammit!" She pounded her fist on the roof of the car. "Don't you get it?! He used me!"

For months Sydnie had kept all the frustration, all the hurt, all the anger hidden away from her friends, and she thought, from herself. But now that she dared to talk about it, she discovered she'd never buried it at all. The ugly truth was just lying in wait, holding off for the right time to strike.

"Hey, take it easy, Syd," Casey said. "Let us help you."

"Thanks for the offer, but I think I can fire Trevor on my own." Syd opened the car door and plopped down behind the wheel. The passenger door opened and Terri crawled into the back and Casey slid into the front seat opposite Sydnie. "He's on my turf now. He can crawl away on all fours in shame this time."

"You can't fire him, Syd," Terri said from between the camel-colored bucket seats. "We need him too much. We've got a bunch of jobs waiting that we need a carpenter for. And with the grand opening next week, we can't let him go."

Sydnie focused her attention on the speedometer, longing to race her car to its maximum speed of one-hundred and twenty miles per hour. There was nothing quite like a fast car and loud music to help a girl put things in perspective. She glanced at her friend's expectant faces and knew hot rodding wasn't an option today.

"Then we need to get some more men hired as soon as possible," Syd said as she turned the key. The 351 Cleveland engine roared to life. She put the car in gear and took off out of the plaza parking lot. "I refuse to be made a fool of a second time. Casey, do we have any new apps we can take a look at?"

"Yes. In fact, we had about a dozen more come in this week alone. And some very promising ones at that. Word is getting around."

"Good. Sort through them and line up the interviews right away. We need to have enough manpower on board if we're going to make this work."

"I've got an idea," Casey said. "You said that you think Trevor is after something."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, find out what it is. And, in the process, have a little fun at *his* expense."

"And just how am I supposed to do that?"

"*Seduce him.*"

"What?!" Sydnie couldn't help but laugh. "You've got to be kidding."

"I never kid," Casey said defensively. "Trevor is after something. It's clear to me from what you've told us, he thinks seducing *you* will give him what he's after. Step on the court for some one-on-one fun. If he thinks seduction can give him what he wants, it can give you what you want."

"Turnabout *is* fair play, Syd," Terri added.

"Getting even is tempting," Syd agreed. She gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

"Then it's decided," Casey said. "I'll get you scheduled in for an emergency session at my spa as soon as we get back to the office."

"Your spa? What for?"

"Honey. You're out to snare a man. You'll be amazed at what a facial and pedicure can do for a woman's confidence."

"Sounds scrumptious. Can you get me in, too?" Terri asked as Syd raced the car down the busy street.

CHAPTER NINE

Trevor pulled on the handle of the Studs for Hire office and about jerked his arm out of its socket. "Damn! Why the hell is the door locked?" he grumbled. The idea that maybe Sydnie was trying to tell him something flickered through his mind. But he'd never allow her to lock him out of her life so easily.

He peered through the tinted glass door but couldn't see anyone. Glancing at the parking lot he noticed two cars, but neither one was Syd's.

"Where is everybody?" Pulling his keys out of his pocket, Trevor turned the lock and stepped inside. First appearances told him all was quiet on the handyman front. "That's odd," he mumbled as he checked one empty office after another. The place looked as though the girls had all checked in this morning, but then left suddenly. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was only ten-thirty, way too early for lunch.

Where was Syd? Where were Casey and Terri? They should be here, busy at work.

They could be in a business meeting, but if so, wouldn't they have it here?

A terrible thought struck him. What if one of them were sick or, worse yet, hurt? He hurried into Syd's office to see if she'd left him any kind of note explaining their whereabouts. Her computer was on and the screen saver fish swam back and forth as usual.

Papers lay scattered on her desk and on the floor where they'd fallen the night before as he'd lifted Sydnie onto its smooth surface.

He grinned at the arousing memory. If he had anything to say about it, he was going to see that they finished what they'd started here on this desk.

But first he needed to find her.

Trevor rummaged through the papers searching for a note, but all he found were proofs of brochures and business cards for the business. He dug a little deeper and saw her drawings for a business logo and layouts for an advertising campaign. He studied the layouts with appreciation and marveled at Sydnie's talent. She was good at coming up with new, clever ideas.

Very good. These layouts proved why Mars was so insistent Sydnie be the one to head up his advertising for the Stardust account.

She was the best.

Smythe had been a fool not to recognize her unmistakable talent. And he had been a fool for not doing everything in his power to keep her in his employ. Smythe had let her walk out, a box of belongings tucked under one arm, and didn't lift a finger to stop her.

And neither had Trevor. The day Sydnie had resigned from Smythe and Jones, was a day Trevor would never forget. It was the day he realized, too late of course, that he was in love with her.

"Looking for something?" he heard Syd ask from behind him. He stiffened at the sharpness of her voice, but then a

wave of relief rushed through him. She was all right. He turned and gave her a genuine smile. She didn't have any scrapes or bruises that he could see, and in fact, she looked more beautiful than ever.

"A note," he said, "from you. When I got here, the place was locked up tight and deserted."

"Something came up." She took the ad layout he was holding and dropped it on the desk. "But then if you'd made it to work on time, you would have known that. Where have you been?" She crossed her arms and tapped her index finger on her sleeve.

Trevor saw a flash of suspicion cloud her gaze. "I had a dental appointment" he said hoping like hell he sounded convincing. "Didn't I tell you?"

"No. You didn't."

"Sorry. I guess it slipped my mind."

"Yes, it did. This isn't like your old job where you can come and go as you please—"

"What was the emergency?" he asked, shifting the conversation so he wouldn't have to come up with any more lies today. "Is everything all right? Are Casey and Terri ok?"

"They're fine. We just needed a TCBY run."

"TCBY?" he asked. Trevor couldn't stop a laugh from escaping his throat.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing. I guess making an ice cream run first thing in the morning is one of the perks of being your own boss. I'm glad everyone's all right. You had me worried, Syd."

Sydnie stepped out from behind the desk and stood before Trevor. "Did I?" she asked softly. A slight smile tugged at the corner of her lips. She moved closer. So close in fact that Trevor could smell the subtle honey scent of her hair. Aftershocks of their rendezvous the night before flooded his body with a blazing ache that was getting damn tough for him to deny.

He swallowed hard and struggled to find something intelligent to say. "Yeah."

"I have another job lined up for you." She let her head fall back slightly, exposing the hollow of her throat to his gaze.

"Do you?" Trevor could only hope it would be an order to meet her at her apartment for a little box spring adjustment.

"Yes. I think you'll enjoy it." She ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. Trevor suppressed a groan and shortened the inches between them. Here was his chance to finish the game. And Syd was making it easy.

Too damn easy. Trevor bristled, his gut warning him that possibly the roles of cat and mouse had been reversed.

The phone rang and Sydnie stretched to answer the call. The tip of her breast brushed against Trevor's arm and jolted him with an impact that rivaled that of a lighting bolt. He jammed his hands into his jeans' pockets to keep from pulling her into his arms and toppling them to the floor in a tangle of scorching need.

"This is Syd," she answered. She sounded a little breathless, and Trevor grinned to himself. It was nice to know that he affected *her* as much as she did him. "Thanks, Casey. I'll be there." She hung up the receiver and blessed him with

another view of that sultry smile of hers. Trevor gazed at the perfect, moist bow of her mouth. Sydnie really did have the most kissable lips he'd ever seen.

And had the pleasure of ever tasting.

He wanted to taste them again. Now! Twelve hours between kisses was way to long to wait.

She traced the tip of her finger across his chin and for a second Trevor was afraid he was drooling. Was Syd wiping up after him rather than bestowing him with a caress? Ever since that night in his office, she'd just as soon kick him in the ass as show him the least bit of affection. Could it be she was changing her mind about him?

God, he hoped so. But then, if things got too serious, too soon between them, it was going to make his task all the harder.

For the both of them.

"About that job," Syd said. She rummaged through the papers on her desk. "I need to clean this off. I can't stand clutter. Drives me insane."

"I could help you. Clean the clutter off your desk, that is. As I recall, we had a good start at it last night."

Syd's hands stilled on the papers for a few seconds before she resumed her search. "Here it is," she said, giving him no other indication she'd heard a single word of his innuendo. She stuffed the work order into his hand and glanced at her watch. "You'd best hurry. You can't be late." She grabbed him by the arm and steered him toward the door.

"All right, all right. I'm going."

"Trevor?"

"Yeah." He stopped and turned around.

"Make sure you do a good job. There's a lot riding on this one."

"Have I given you reason to doubt my skills?" he asked, feeling a little hurt by her implication.

"It's not your carpentry skills I'm worried about," she said sarcastically. Her phone rang again and she raced to answer it, leaving Trevor wondering what kind of circus he was going to walk into this time.

* * * *

Sydney moaned softly as the masseuse placed the last of the warm stones on her back. Ah. This was the life. Lounging the afternoon away and being pampered with a manicure, pedicure, and a massage, all fit for royalty, was pure decadence.

This was costing her a small fortune, but Casey was right. Nothing like a trip to the spa to make a girl feel sexy and invincible.

She hoped like hell it worked. That little scene between her and Trevor in her office this morning was proof that she needed some serious help in the seduction department. Sydney Riley was no femme fatale.

"Case," Syd said to her friend who was lying face down on the next table.

"Hmm?"

"It's harder than what I anticipated."

Casey opened her eyes and arched a perfectly plucked brow. "It's supposed to be, kiddo. Didn't you take sex ed in high school?"

"No! That's not what I meant. And yes, I had sex ed. We were in the same class, remember?"

"That's right, you were the shy girl who blushed every time Mrs. Yates said the word erect—"

"Stop, or else I'll throw hot rocks at your new set of acrylics."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me. Besides, you might deserve a stoning for concocting this whole crazy scheme in the first place. What if seducing Trevor doesn't work."

"Oh ye of little faith," Casey mocked. "It'll work."

"Yeah, it'd work all right if *you* were the one seducing him. This morning I felt like that shy, blushing teenage girl all over again. It was so embarrassing."

"I could."

"Could what?"

"Seduce Trevor for you. I'd be more than happy to find out what he's up to."

"Thanks for offering, Case, but no thanks. I'll manage. Somehow." Syd cringed at the doubt she heard in her own voice. Yeah, she'd manage somehow all right. She'd manage to make a fool of herself and send Trevor running for the nearest door.

"Yes, you will. Now give yourself some credit. You're an attractive woman. What man could resist you?"

"All of them apparently," Syd sighed. "My phone isn't exactly ringing off the hook with marriage proposals. Seems like lately, I can't even get a date. And I blew it with Trevor this morning. I had the perfect opportunity to play the temptress."

"And you didn't," Casey stated flatly.

"I started to."

"And?"

"And ... I felt like a nervous idiot and shoved him out the door. Maybe I should call my doctor and see if he'll give me a prescription for anxiety."

"Enough with the negative thinking already. You've got to exude confidence, and I know you have it inside that stubborn brain of yours, or else Trevor will see right through you."

"Ugh ... I know you're right, but I'm just not sure about this."

"Trust me. You'll do fine. You said things got hot and heavy between you two last night. Keep doing what you did then and he'll be melting at your feet."

"But that's different. Last night wasn't planned. Trevor caught me off guard."

"Syd, stop making excuses. Now listen to me. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, yes. Although I'm not sure I should be."

"That hurts, Syd. I'm trying to help you and what does it get me? Ridicule."

"Sorry. My nerves are on the verge of being shot."

"Okay. You can do this. Be yourself, just pump it up a notch. Put that Venus bra on again, light those eucalyptus candles I told you to buy, and hell, put Barry Manilow back on the stereo if that's what it takes. Create the right atmosphere and he's massage oil in your hands. Besides, Trevor is so hot for you that his eyes smolder in his head every time you're together. You have nothing to worry about."

"Well ... maybe you're right," Syd groaned. She wanted to believe everything Casey said, but it was pretty tough when a girl had been burned once before. And if Trevor's eyes really did smolder for her, she hoped they didn't throw her so far off balance, she fell.

* * * *

Trevor strapped on his leather tool belt, grabbed his tool box out of the bed of his truck, and strode up the walk to the large Tudor style home. Thrilled wasn't a word he'd use to describe his feelings about being back in the posh Happy Hollow area. The nightmare of his last visit to the neighborhood was still making him seriously consider psychotherapy.

But if he wanted to keep his cover, he didn't dare defy Syd's orders. He had a sinking feeling that he was walking on thin ice the way it was, he didn't need to make things worse by refusing to do the job.

With a little luck, he could wrap up this charade in a couple more days. He'd get the information he needed, Alfred would be ecstatic with another colossal ad campaign, Smythe would

be happy because Alfred was happy, Trevor would get his partnership and Sydnie wouldn't be any the wiser.

"Yeah, right, Vanden Bosch," Trevor scoffed. He knew better than to believe that he and Syd could waltz through this ordeal unscathed. Once his mission was complete, misery would be his constant companion. He was going to miss Syd's sauciness, her soft skin and delectable lips.

She'd be mad as hell at him he knew, and he didn't relish the idea of being on her black list again, but then, he wasn't sure if he'd ever really gotten off it in the first place.

Trevor cursed under his breath. This was a situation that no matter what he did, he was going to come out the loser.

And so was Syd. The last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt her. He'd done it once, and he sure as hell didn't want to up his score to two and O.

"Thanks, Smythe," he grumbled. He reached for the doorbell button, but paused. Maybe he should come clean, confess his sins now, before something really went wrong, like Syd finding out the truth. Surely she'd be more understanding, more willing to forgive him if he told her the only reason he was doing this was to appease his boss.

Well, that wasn't exactly the only reason, he thought silently. The truth was, he'd agreed to this wild scheme because it was a chance to be near her again. And maybe, just maybe, they could pick up where they'd left off before this whole promotion debacle ruined it all.

But first he needed to find out how well Syd accepted his confession. And if she didn't kick him out on his butt in a fit of female rage, he'd brave telling her the rest of the story.

How he truly felt about her.

The creak of the heavy mahogany door startled Trevor out of his musings as it swung wide. Bright lights flashed and popped before his eyes, blinding him.

"What the hell?" Trevor held up a hand to block the glare of flashbulbs.

A hand reached out of the crowd and grabbed his shirt and yanked him into the house. He was pushed and shoved among a crush of people filling the foyer and an anonymous elbow jabbed him in the kidney. He lurched forward from the sharp pain and a tape recorder whopped his lip. The unmistakable taste of blood hit his tongue.

"Ace Loveman, with Mating.com," a short, scrawny guy said as he stuffed his business card in to Trevor's hand. "How does it feel to be a Stud?"

"Would you compare a Stud to a Chippendale?" a lanky brunette asked from the back.

"I heard you'll be posing for Playgirl next. Is that true?" an older woman with flaming red hair asked as she pushed her short frame through the crowd. Her cat glasses sat on the tip of her nose, a sliver chain dangled from the bows and draped around her neck. She stared at Trevor over the top of her glasses as she waited for an answer, her pen poised and ready to jot down every word he said.

"Are you on a special diet?" someone else asked.

"What kind of exercise regime do you follow?"

"Do you wax your body hair?"

"Are you allowed to have sex with your clients?"

What the hell was going on here?! Trevor stared in disbelief at the mob of reporters filling the house. He'd walked into a circus all right. A media circus.

"Hold it!" He shouted over the pandemonium and waved his arms. Silence cloaked the room like a thick fog. He studied the throng of reporters and they all looked liked they were frozen in time, ready to titter off the edge of a cliff with their tape recorders and steno pads at the ready for one last scoop.

No one moved. No one dared to breathe.

But their eyes. He suppressed a shiver. Their eyes were as intense as those of a pack of starving wolves.

He raked his fingers through his hair and chaos erupted once more.

"What do you find sexy in a woman?" someone shouted.

"Do you worry about harassment charges?" another asked.

"Are you a Viagra user?"

Trevor groaned and eyed the door only a few feet away. If he could push backwards through the crowd, he'd bolt for his truck and get the hell out of Dodge.

An ear piercing whistle came from the back of the room and the commotion came to an abrupt halt.

"Let the poor boy alone," a gravelly voice ordered. "Let me through. Let me through, I say. This is my house."

Trevor watched the crowd of reporters part like the Red Sea for a little old lady who was lucky to stand five feet with her blue hair puffed like a cotton ball. She stopped in front of Trevor and craned her neck to look up at him.

She smiled and grabbed his hand and shook it with all the gusto of a Sumo wrestler. "Howdy there, son. My name's Della. This here is my house you're standing in. Glad you could make it."

"Ah, great to meet you, Della." A series of flashbulbs popped as the two exchanged pleasantries.

"Now knock that off, all of you!" Della scolded as she shook her finger at the crowd. "You've done got yourself enough pictures for your papers. Let this poor boy be now so he can get to work. Go on, now, all of ya. I've let you traipse over my Berber carpet long enough."

A chorus of grumbles rumbled through the reporters as they filed out the front door one at a time.

"I'm pretty good with my hands," Ace Loveman said before he made his way to the door. "Do you suppose I could get a job at Studs for Hire?" He smiled and rocked back on his Nike heels.

"I don't know," Trevor said skeptically. "You'd have to talk to the boss and—"

"*You* want to be a Stud?!" Della chuckled. "Sonny, I think you need to start pumping some iron and take a few steroids before you can ever hope to look like this stallion here." Della posed her hands in front of Trevor like she was highlighting a prize on a game show.

Trevor fought a rush of mortification and wished he could run before he lost what little sanity he'd managed to save. But he had the dire feeling that before the day was over, he'd need more than psychotherapy.

Hell. He'd need a padded cell.

CHAPTER TEN

Sydney braked her Torino to a stop in her apartment building parking lot in the Old Market area of downtown Omaha. She rolled the windows down all the way and allowed the early summer breeze to flutter through the car's interior.

Cutting the engine, she leaned her head back and inhaled the freshness of the new season. The late afternoon sun warmed her recently babied skin.

She had to admit she felt like a new person, invigorated even, after hours at the spa. Like Wonder Woman, she was ready to take on the world and make her mark.

But no matter how invigorated she felt, she knew no amount of pampering could prepare her for the *Seduction of Trevor* plan she and her friends had plotted.

Whether she was ready to push Trevor to the brink of sexual frustration, didn't matter. It was now or never, time to put aside her doubts and be that femme fatale she'd always fantasied about being.

If Trevor was up to no good and after something, then she needed to find out exactly what it was.

And why.

If her instincts were right, Trevor was still working for Smythe and Jones on the sly, and he was searching for some kind of information from her concerning the Stardust Lingerie account. But what? What could she possibly know about the account that he didn't? They'd worked hand-in-hand on the ad campaigns for the company, bounced ideas off of each

other and pretty much always agreed on what worked, and what didn't. It just didn't make sense.

Could there possibly be something else that he wanted from her? Her business was so new that it really couldn't be considered competition yet to any other contracting firm.

Trevor surely didn't hope to buy the business, did he? Since he claimed he'd been fired from Smythe and Jones, it was possible he might be looking for a new business venture. The day he'd applied for a job at Studs, he did mention he was in need of a change in his life—

But they had no figures, no proof that the business would even be successful. Sydnie had no doubts that Studs for Hire would be a runaway hit with the female population, but most investors preferred to wait and see before they entrusted their money in a *supposed* sure thing. And the majority of male investors probably wouldn't see a handyman service that advertised *Playgirl* contenders as fantasy plumbers, as a wise choice for their dollars.

Of course there was always the possibility that Charles Smythe wanted to resume his dirty little tricks and had arranged to drive her out of business. Chauvinistic Smythe wouldn't hesitate to seek revenge on a woman because she embarrassed him by quitting with a bang. And assigning Trevor to do his dirty work would be so typical of the man who'd caused more than one person a ton of grief.

But if Trevor's sudden appearance wasn't for either of those reasons, *why* else would he be here?

There was only one other she could think of—rekindle the flames between them. Syd shook her head, not buying that

scenario. Trevor had made it blatantly clear that night in his office that he was in no way interested in a relationship with her.

Had he changed his mind?

Even if he did, that was tough. She'd been made a fool of and had been seen as nothing more than a tawdry office fling by her co-workers. Once was enough.

The familiar sting of tears filled Syd's eyes as she remembered the worst night of her life. She'd never been so humiliated and devastated at the same time. The iciness that had frosted Trevor's eyes was as clear to her now as if the whole scene had happened only moments ago.

And now, she'd tallied up another equally embarrassing scene between them.

True, last night the situation *was* different. Trevor had caught her making an idiot of herself while dancing in her underwear, but that hadn't stopped him from kissing her. And he wasn't the one who'd put the brakes on their foreplay. Next time she saw her dad, she'd be sure and tell him thanks for his impeccable timing. A few more minutes in her embrace, and she might have gotten Trevor to confess.

What if her dad hadn't called, she wondered. Would they have made love right there on her desk? Syd groaned. What did it say about her love life that every time she actually came close to having a love life, her dream man was always a co-worker? And that the co-worker she'd chosen, was only capable of breaking her heart in the end.

"It's says you spend way too much time at work, that's what," she mumbled.

But what had transpired between them since she'd hired Trevor on with Studs for Hire, suggested that maybe he did care about her. At least a little. Maybe he had changed his mind about wanting to get involved.

Nah. Casey was right. Sex was his motive. He was a man, after all. Trevor was probably filled with regret once he'd come to his senses and realized what amazing, hot sex he'd missed out on.

Sydney laughed out loud at the thought. *Yeah, you bet.*

"Private joke?" a husky voice asked from the passenger side window.

Sydney jumped in her seat and plastered her body against the door. "What the—" she yanked off her sunglasses and stared in disbelief at the man grinning mischievously at her. "Vanden Bosch! You scared the heck out of me! You should learn to knock."

"You're in a car."

"So. You could still knock." She watched him roll those whisky-colored eyes of his. "Kind of making a bad habit of spying on me, aren't you?"

"I wasn't spying. I pulled into the lot not more than two minutes ago."

"Do I dare ask what you're doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Why?"

"What is this, twenty questions? I'm supposed to check in with the boss at the end of each work day. Remember? I'd hate to go against employee rule number five and get written

up," he mocked, undoubtedly making reference to the new employees' handbook she'd left in his truck.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"Process of elimination. You weren't at the office, so your apartment was next on the list."

"And if you hadn't of found me here, where would you look for me next?" she asked.

"Are you hoping I'm following you?"

"Of course not! I'm just curious, is all."

"Since you asked, I'll tell you. I'd start with the nearest ice cream shop."

Sydney bit back a sigh. Was her life really that predictable—work and ice cream cones? Heck, she even had a shower and fridge in her office so she could work late. Why did she even bother to pay rent for an apartment?

She studied Trevor out of the corner of her eye. He leaned through the car window and looked as roguish as any rebel character she'd seen in a movie. Maybe now would be as good a time as any to sweep away some of that dull predictability. As Casey suggested, have a little one-on-one fun. That is if she could muster up the nerve to seize this fortuitous moment.

Syd glanced down at her clothes and saw her favorite grey sweats and an old, oversized concert T-shirt. She put her sunglasses back on to help hide the fact she wasn't wearing any makeup and realized her hair was still pulled back in a most unbecoming ponytail.

Yeah, right. She really had the look of a seductress going here. Perhaps it'd be best to put this would-be temptress skit on hold until later.

A lot later.

"Okay, so you've checked in. I'll see you in the morning," she said in a rush, suddenly eager to get rid of him.

"Not so fast." Trevor opened the door and slid into the seat beside her.

Sydnie cringed. Great. Just what she needed. One close look at her this way, and Trevor would bolt from the car in horror, never to return.

The roominess of the classic car shrank with Trevor's muscular frame filling the right-hand side. Why did he have to be so darn handsome—and so big? Just looking at him made her tingle all the way down to her toe ring.

"Sorry. I'm kind of in a hurry," she said, searching for any excuse to end this impromptu meeting. She needed more time to prepare herself for this. Much more time. She needed a facial.

And she needed air.

Even with both windows wide open, the car was suffocating. She grabbed the door handle but Trevor's hand encircled her arm, stopping her. The touch of his fingers on her skin, and the overwhelmingly close proximity of his body, sent the temperature soaring into the bursting thermometer zone.

"Sorry, babe. You're not buggin' out on me this time."

"What could be so important that it can't wait until tomorrow?" she asked, breathless from the simmering warmth of his touch.

"I want an answer. And I'm not letting you go until you give me one."

"Pretty demanding, aren't we?" She swallowed hard, wondering where this extremely dangerous encounter was headed.

"I want to know why you keep setting me up for the fall?" he asked with a harsh tone.

"Setting you up for a fall? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Cut the innocent act, Syd. You said there was a lot riding on that job today. Now I know why. You knew damn good and well I was walking into a reporter's feeding frenzy."

"Oh ... that. Well, I see you survived."

"Only because years of business experience have taught me how to handle tough situations. But whether or not I wax my body hair is getting a bit too personal for comfort."

"Did someone really ask you that?" she grinned and tried not to laugh.

"Yes!"

"So do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Wax your body hair?"

Trevor shot her a devilishly sinful grin. "Why don't we get naked so you can find out?"

Oops! She set herself up for that one. "I don't think so."

"All right. So tell me what is going on, then."

"What? Nothing ... is going on. It just slipped my mind to mention the media promo scheduled for this morning."

"Try again," he said, his lips mere inches from her own. "From the first day I started working for you, you've been deliberately assigning me jobs that you knew I'd find ... let's say ... challenging. So far I've been attacked by a sex deprived old woman, a Rottweiler, and now reporters. What's next on your list of tricks?"

Even though Trevor was chewing her out, the movement of his lips as he spoke, mesmerized her.

"How about a kiss ... from me," she said before she could stop herself, or think about the repercussions.

Desire chipped away the tense muscles lining Trevor's face. "Now that's one job I'd love to do." The deep timbre of his voice sent a tremble of anticipation flowing through her body. He brushed aside her pony tail and let his fingertips graze over the flushed skin at the nape of her neck. Her breath hitched. With a firm, but gentle tug, he inched her forward—closer to his lips, closer to the heat. His mouth covered hers with deliberate slowness, teasing her senses with the delicious taste of him.

Sydney moaned softly in the back of her throat as his tongue sought and found hers. The kisses they'd shared last night had been hot, electrifying even, but this one, this one here in her car, in a public place, in broad daylight, sent her yearnings accelerating way over the speed limit.

This felt almost naughty, and even dangerous.
And she loved it. Bye-bye predictability.

She clasped his shoulders and snuggled up against him. Trevor responded to her hunger and slid his hand beneath her shirt. With mystical fingers, he traced circles around her belly button. Her breath hitched and a fire erupted at the center of her femininity.

Yeah, this was dangerous all right, she thought as they slid lower on the seat. Dangerous as hell.

"Your skin is so soft, so smooth," he whispered against her cheek. His tongue traced an arresting trail along her jaw and to her earlobe. The warmth of his breath against her skin sent her heart reeling.

You bet. She was quite the seductress, here. Had Trevor playing right out of her hand she thought as she struggled to catch her breath.

Trevor pushed up her shirt and loosened the clasp on her bra, exposing her breasts to the waning afternoon light. The brush of his fingertips across her nipple sent her heart into spastic mode.

Yep. She certainly had this situation under control.

"Whoa, dude," a voice said from outside of the car.

Sydney and Trevor froze.

"You guys really ought to do that kind of stuff in the dark. It's better for everybody that way. This is a nice place. Someone might call the cops."

Sydney craned her neck and glanced up at a young blonde-haired kid who stared down at them with his mouth open. Embarrassing moment number three clicked onto her growing list.

"Thanks for the advice," Trevor mocked.

"Hey, don't I know you?" the kid asked as he pointed at Sydnie. "You live on my floor, don't you?"

"Could be," Syd said as she tried to move beneath Trevor and relieve the ache in her twisted neck. An excruciating pain shot up her leg as it cramped from their tangled position. "I work a lot," she said in an effort to dismiss her newly introduced neighbor.

"Obviously." The kid scrunched up his face in revulsion. "Or else you'd have more time for sex in the privacy of your own home. The world is really going to the dogs when people your age have to have sex in their cars just so they can get it. That's major stress. Take a vacation," he admonished.

"We'll do that," Trevor bit out. "Since you find us so *old* and *repulsive*, why don't you beat it?"

"Sure, dude. No need to get nasty," the kid mumbled as he hopped on his skate board and took off down the street.

"Is he gone?" Syd asked.

"Yeah."

"He's right. This is a nice neighborhood. If someone sees us, they will call the police. You'd better get off of me."

"I can't."

"What? What do you mean you can't?"

"Let's just say that the gear shift is pushing against a ... strategic point and my leg fell asleep."

Sydnie giggled.

"It's not funny."

"Oh, yes it is. Look at us. That kid was right. People our age don't *get it on* in cars."

Trevor joined her laughter. "Yeah. I hate to admit it, but I'm not as limber as I once was. Making out in a car used to be a snap."

With Sydnie's help, Trevor managed to push himself into an upright position. She yanked her shirt down and studied the steering wheel, suddenly feeling like that shy teenage girl from high school again.

Trevor stomped his foot against the floor in an effort to shake away the numbness in his right leg.

"When was the last time you parked?" Trevor asked.

"Ah, it's been a while," Syd said, not wanting to admit that she hadn't had such an encounter since back in nineteen ninety-something. She removed the band holding her now skewed ponytail in place and ruffled her fingers through her hair.

"Yeah. For me too. I guess I'm kind of out of practice—making out in a *car* that is."

"Feeling out of practice with anything else?" Sydnie asked, deciding to try her hand at some sneaky interrogation. She needed to concentrate on getting some of her own answers.

"What do you mean?"

"How about advertising? Do you miss it?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Curious. The creative person needs to exercise their right brain to keep it sharp. It's like anything. You don't use it. You lose it. I thought maybe since you're no longer working for Smythe and Jones you might be going through withdrawal."

She glanced at Trevor out of the corner of her eye. He looked as though he was processing her questions, but had no intentions of answering.

"You once told me you thrived on the creative challenge. Do you still?" she asked, trying again.

"Sure. But working with wood takes creativity, and some projects can prove to be very challenging. I like it. And I like the freedom. It'd be nice not to have to put up with the pressures of the advertising world every day," he added as though he were speaking to himself.

"Would?" Syd asked. Now they were getting somewhere.

"I mean, *is*. It is nice not to have to put up with the hassles. Guess I'm not quite used to the idea of being out of the ad business, yet. I did it for a lot of years. But come to think of it, I don't really miss trying to please the moguls." Trevor slipped on his sunglasses. "Listen. I've got to run. I'll catch you later." Trevor got out of the car and shut the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, Syd," he said as he leaned down and looked at her through the window, his dark glasses hiding his eyes, and his thoughts from her.

"Right. See you tomorrow. Oh, Trev. Before I forget, I've got a photo shoot lined up for you tomorrow morning at ten."

"Photo shoot? What for?"

"Publicity. We need some shots of our guys to attract business, and to use for the grand opening celebration."

Trevor stiffened. "Ah, I don't know, Syd. That's not my sort of thing."

"Too bad. It's part of the job." She handed him a business card with the photographer's address printed on it. "Be there, or be fired."

"Whatever you say, *boss*," he grumbled and gave her a mock salute.

Syd pursed her lips as she watched Trevor walk toward his truck. Trevor Vanden Bosch was starting to crack. He'd slipped, and he knew it.

Syd smiled. The plan was working. Now all she needed to do was what Casey had suggested. Kick things up a few more notches.

* * * *

"This better be good," Alfred said as he planted his hands on his hips.

Trevor believed the ad campaign he'd slaved over all night long was damn good. But it didn't matter if Trevor thought it was fantastic. If Mars hated the ideas that were supposed to be Sydnie's, they were sunk.

And if Trevor couldn't stay awake long enough to sell Mars on the campaign, he was sunk.

"Don't worry, Alfred," Smythe chimed in. He tugged on his sleeves of his expensive suit coat and smiled like a shady used car salesman. "We promised you a colossal advertising campaign, and that's exactly what we're going to deliver. Unfortunately I can't stay to do the honors, so I've asked Trevor to take over for me. I have another pressing matter to attend to. Trevor," Smythe said smoothly, "the floor is yours."

Now if you'll excuse me gentlemen, I must rush off. Duty calls."

Trevor cursed under his breath. Duty called all right. The duty to tee off at the golf course in twenty minutes. Trevor tamped down the urge to grab his boss by his tailor cut coat tails and force him to bleed through this like he had to. Trevor didn't care to take this trip to hell alone.

But that's exactly what would happen. And then Smythe would make good on his promise and fire Trevor when it all fell apart.

"Just as well," Alfred said as Smythe slithered through the door. "I don't like that man. He's as underhanded as a swamp rat. If it wasn't for Sydnie, I'd take my account elsewhere."

Even though Trevor agreed with Alfred's accurate observation of the president of Smythe and Jones, he didn't comment.

Mars glanced around the room. "Isn't Sydnie coming?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not. You'll have to settle for just me."

"Look. I don't have anything against you, yet, Vanden Bosch. But I'm beginning to wonder if you fall in the same rodent category as your boss. Besides, I miss Sydnie."

Trevor ignored Alfred's implication and instead concentrated on the tinge of jealousy he was feeling. He was glad that Syd no longer worked for Smythe and Jones. That way she stayed far away from Mars, and Mars stayed far away from her.

"I miss Sydnie as well," he said boldly as his gaze locked with his client's.

"I was looking forward to taking her out for dinner tonight to celebrate," Mars countered. "When do you expect her back? I'll pick her up at the airport and take her out then." He crossed his arms and widened his stance, clearly changing the thrust of the meeting.

Seconds ticked by as each of the two men threw their nonverbal challenges for Sydnie's affections into the ring.

"I'm not sure," Trevor said at last. "When I spoke with her this morning, she made it sound as though it could be a while."

Mars eyed Trevor doubtfully. "Have her call me as soon as she gets back," he demanded.

Trevor stiffened at the man's order then opened his portfolio. Getting into a boxing match with Mars wouldn't be a good idea. "Let's get started."

"Yes, let's." Mars eased his tall frame into a leather chair and waited. Trevor took a deep breath, ready as he'd ever be to put his head on the chopping block.

"...and now," Trevor continued thirty minutes later after showing Mars layout after layout, "Sydnie proposes we use everyday women to model the Venus Bra."

"Everyday women? You mean just any woman off the street?"

"To a certain degree. The idea is that the Venus Bra and thong panty can make any woman as sexy as any model, and as bewitching as Aphrodite herself. Men will love the lingerie because it'll give them something extra special to come home to."

Mars shifted in his seat, not looking thoroughly convinced. The diamond studded ring on his left hand winked in the light as he gripped the arm of the chair.

"Stardust Lingerie is a heartland-based company," Trevor continued. "With that foundation, we can prove to the world your lingerie is designed specifically for the everyday woman—the secretaries, the nurses, the farm wives. They, too, can be Venus. Women are tired of seeing waif-like models strutting down runways. The average woman in this country doesn't weigh one hundred pounds. Convince *her* she is as sexy, as alluring as Aphrodite, and her loyalty to the product will make Stardust Lingerie number one in the galaxy. You'll sell millions of Venus Bras."

Mars steepled his fingers and nodded, relaxing a bit. "I like it," he said at last. "In spite of my earlier misgivings, I'm willing to give it a go."

Trevor breathed a huge sigh of relief. At least he wasn't sparring with Mars over advertising ideas.

"Great. We'll put the campaign in motion immediately."

"Not quite so fast. I have one stipulation." Mars stood and shifted his weight to one foot. He brushed back his blazer and placed a hand on his hip.

"Whatever you want, Alfred. We'll do it. Say the word."

"I want Sydnie to be the lead model in the campaign."

What?! Trevor's heart lodged in his throat. Anything but that! "Excuse me?"

"You heard right, Vanden Bosch. I want Sydnie to be the lead model. I want to see her on those billboards, in the magazines ads. And on my TV."

"Sydnie isn't a model," Trevor said with a hard edge. No way did he want every man, including Mars, and his dog, to see Sydnie in what he'd seen—practically nothing.

"Isn't that the whole idea? Or did you just waste the last thirty minutes of my time whistling Dixie?"

"No. Of course not, but—"

"But what? Sydnie is an average everyday woman, yet she's prettier than a starlit night, and is sexy as Aphrodite herself. She's got a great pair of legs, too. Combine all those elements with that glorious hair of hers, and she'll have men running out to buy my lingerie so fast they won't care about anything else. *Sydnie* will be their Aphrodite, their Venus."

For only the men of the world? Or for Alfred Mars?

"Syd is conservative, shy. She won't go for it," he said in an effort to talk Mars out of this ridiculous stipulation.

"She isn't quite the shy innocent you think she is, Vanden Bosch. I know what she's after by wearing those tight sweaters and short skirts. She's like any woman. They all want the attentions of us men."

Trevor fisted his hands, wanting to belt the man. He took a deep breath. He had to remain calm, keep his cool, or he'd blow this deal, although at this moment he really didn't give a damn. "Sure, she wears tight sweaters on occasion. But that's her choice. I think she deserves the right to say yes or no on this proposal."

"I want Sydnie, Vanden Bosch."

"You can't force her to do it."

"She'll be more than compensated."

Compensated? In what way—the privilege of being his majesty's concubine? "Money isn't everything," he said instead.

"No more butts. Sydnie models the Venus Bra, or I'll take my business elsewhere." Mars held up his hand, closing the subject.

Damn! What the hell kind of ultimatum was that? Mars wasn't playing fair.

And Trevor knew why.

Mars was jealous.

Dammit. If he'd kept his personal feelings for Sydnie in check, he wouldn't be in this new no-way-out predicament. Trevor racked his brain for some other excuse to tell Mars that asking Sydnie to model the Venus Bra was a bad idea.

A very bad idea.

But the only one he could come up with was, the truth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Good morning, Mr. Vanden Bosch. I'm Milford Humphrey. If you'll come this way, we'll get started," the silver-haired photographer said as he led Trevor into the studio.

An assortment of hand and power tools cluttered a table off to the side of a large grey backdrop. Okay. This wouldn't be so bad, Trevor thought. He could do this. He could pose with a Black & Decker circular saw. No problem.

"The dressing room is over there," the elderly man said as he pointed a boney finger to the opposite side of the room. "When you're ready, take a seat on that stool." He scurried around the studio like a busy mouse, turning on and adjusting a variety of spot lights.

"I don't need a dressing room. I'm wearing this," Trevor said as he tugged at the collar of the plaid flannel shirt he'd gone out and purchased last night for the occasion.

Milford stopped his preparations and looked up at Trevor through pop bottle thick glasses. "There must have been a miscommunication. You need to remove your clothes. There's a robe in the dressing room you can put on in between shots."

"What?" A lump formed in Trevor's throat. "Are you nuts? I'm not taking off my clothes."

Okay. So this wasn't going to be so easy.

"In spite of the rumors you may have heard, I'm quite sane," the man said defensively. "And I have a letter signed by my doctor attesting to that fact if you wish to examine it."

"Hey, that's okay." Trevor lifted his hands and took a step back. "I believe you. But, about the clothes, I'm—"

"Miss Riley was very specific about getting shots that, I believe the word she used was *smoldered*, with sensuality. And I have every intention of giving her what she's requested."

Trevor gritted his teeth. No way was he stripping for grandpa here.

This was the last straw. He'd get even with Syd for this one. Yeah, it was payback time.

"Look, I've got a better idea," Trevor said with a calm he didn't feel. "I'll unbutton my shirt and ruffle my hair up a little. I can put on my best Elvis sneer, and Voilá! We're done."

The man frowned, his bushy eyebrows drew together, but he appeared to give the notion consideration. "All right. I'll do it your way. I wasn't too thrilled about taking nude photographs of men, let me tell, ya. But you've got to promise me that I'm not responsible if Miss Riley doesn't like the results. I have a business at stake. If word gets out that I don't deliver what the customer wants, I'm jeopardizing future business."

"Sure. That's cool. I'll handle Miss Riley. But, hey. You're probably getting ready to retire anyway, right?"

"On the contrary. I just opened my doors about six months ago."

"Really? Wouldn't you rather be fishing, golfing, having lunch at the senior center, that sort of thing?" Trevor asked

as he took a seat on the stool and undid a couple of buttons on his shirt.

"Nope. I've done that for the last twenty-five years. I'm tired of hanging around old fogies. All that talk about Medicare cuts and pre-funeral arrangements started to depress me. I needed a change of scenery, wanted to get back into the scheme of things. Maybe start dating again."

Dating? If a person got too old to make out in a car, didn't they ever reach an age when they were *too* old to date?

"Looking for a woman, huh, Milf? Just how old would you be?"

"Turned ninety-two last month. Why? Do you have a hot grandma, by chance? I'm not picky either. She can be younger, older, blue-haired, hell, I don't care. As long as she's a female, I'm game. I don't go for that *other* stuff."

"Ah ... no. Sorry, I don't," Trevor said, taken aback by the man's openness.

"Oh," he said clearly disappointed. "What a shame. A man gets tired of trolling for babes at church and the funeral homes. There's got to be other places to meet women. A young good-looking guy like you ought to know all the hot places. Can you clue me in?"

Trevor couldn't argue with Milford's logic about the woes of finding a nice woman. And it was good to know that the younger generations weren't the only ones who faced dating dilemmas.

"Sorry I can't help you, Milf. I haven't had the best of luck in the dating arena myself." *That's what happens when you only have eyes for one girl, and she happens to despise you.*

Milford ruffled Trevor's hair and reached for the buttons on the front of his plaid shirt.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?" Trevor leaped off of the stool.

"Trying to make you look like Elvis, remember? Now sit. And unbutton your shirt down to your waist."

Trevor did as ordered. Milf scanned the collection of tools on the table before selecting a long aluminum level. *So much for exuding his raw masculinity with the circular saw.*

Milf shuffled over and placed the level in Trevor's right hand. He grabbed Trevor's shoulders and twisted him every-which-way before deciding on a pose that left him cockeyed and teetering on the edge of the stool.

"Now, sneer. And don't move." Milf scampered over to the camera. "Come on, Elvis. Let's see some of that smoldering sensuality!"

"Well, thank you very much," Trevor crooned like the King of Rock-n-Roll. A series of flashes lit up the room.

"You know, I have Sydnie to thank for all of this," Milford said as he snatched the level from Trevor and indicated the studio with it.

"Sydnie?"

"Yes. She's my great-niece. She's the one who encouraged me to go for it. Nice girl, don't you think? She'll make some man a fine wife. A very fine wife." Milford winked.

There was no one Trevor would rather make his wife than Sydnie Riley. But he'd probably have better luck witnessing an Elvis siting. "Sure. But I don't think she'd settle for the

likes of me. We haven't always gotten along the best over the last few years."

"Have you asked her if she's interested?"

"Well ... no." If only it were that simple, Trevor thought silently. Her great-uncle had no idea how complicated things were between the two of them.

"There's your problem. You don't know until you ask. All it takes is courage, my boy. These days a man can live a damn long time. If you find the woman you love, and I mean truly love, hold on to her as tight as you can and never let go. That love is worth all the risks in the world."

"Thanks, Milf. I guess I needed to hear that." Trevor smiled, fully realizing what it was he needed to do. "Now. About that circular saw."

* * * *

"Went shopping, I see," Casey said as she joined Sydnie at the copy machine. "Smart choice. That knit top will have Trevor panting big time."

"You don't think it's too much, do you? It shows so much cleavage. I feel like I'm going to fall out. And I'm not used to this draft around my stomach," Syd said, referring to the exposed area of skin created by her jeans and top. The clerk at the clothing store assured her that low rise jeans, and V-cut, skin tight tops, were the way to a man's libido.

"Quit fretting. It's perfect. The man will be hard pressed to keep his hands off of you."

"We'll see." Syd grabbed the papers from the copier and headed for her office.

"By the way, I've got about a dozen or so guys lined up for more interviews this afternoon," Casey said, following Syd. "Some hot prospects, too."

"Good. Go ahead and use your judgement on hiring. I'd like to interview them as well, but we really don't have the time to go through that right now. Keep me posted on what you decide. Oh, and be sure to line up their photo shoots with my uncle Milf right away."

"Will do," Casey said. Syd tossed her papers on the desk and fetched them each a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "So aren't you going to fill me in on how it went last night?" Casey accepted the water from Syd.

"How what went?"

"Oh, come on. I know Trevor went over to your apartment. You did see him, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"Did you have a chance to put any of my suggestions into action? Did things get hot-and-heavy between you two?" Casey smiled and arched a perfectly shaped brow.

Syd twisted the cap off the bottle and took a long swallow. For some reason, revealing information about their attempted tryst in the car bothered her. "Kind of," she said at last.

"Kind of? They either did, or didn't. Which is it?"

"Okay, okay. For a few brief minutes, things got pretty hot-and-heavy."

"Minutes? Why only minutes? You didn't try any of my suggestions, did you?"

"Sure I did. It's just that we got ... interrupted," Syd admitted. The whole scene was still kind of embarrassing.

Casey rolled her eyes and threw up her hands. "Do I dare ask what that interruption was? Do I really want to know?"

"Some college kid caught us necking in my car and said we were too old to be ... making out in the car."

Casey burst out laughing. "In your car? Where were you that someone saw you? The mall parking lot."

"No. My apartment parking lot."

"Really. And you just happened to park under a street light I suppose. Don't you know you're supposed to park in the shadows if you're going to do that?"

"Actually it wasn't a street light."

"Yes?"

"It was broad daylight."

"Woo-hoo! Syd, girl, I didn't know you possessed such a wild side. All these years you've kept it so well hidden."

"It was a total accident," Syd said defensively. "Trevor caught me by surprise and one thing led to another and well ... we got carried away."

"Carried away? Tell me more."

"Things got interesting. And shoot! That kid brought the whole ... rendezvous, or whatever you want to call it, to a screeching halt." Syd shrugged her shoulders and took another sip of her water. It probably was a good thing, though. I got a major crick in my neck from my head being lodged between the seat and the door. I fought a headache the rest of the day because of it. And Trevor pinched a ... nerve on the gear shift."

"Oh, this is too funny. That kid was right. You are too old."

"And I suppose you're not!"

"I gave up cars years ago. Take it from me, do yourself a favor and stick to comfortable places. Far less embarrassing and less painful the next day."

"Yeah, well, at this rate, I'm never going to find out what Trevor's after. I'm not cut out for this temptress stuff."

Sydney ran the tip of her finger along the stem of a Bird of Paradise. "I have to face the facts. I'm a failure in the man department."

"You get bouquets like that and sexy lingerie to boot, and you think you're a failure with men?! Maybe you should seek counseling."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence, *friend*." Syd laid down on the couch and cuddled with a pillow. "It's been days since those flowers were delivered and Alfred still hasn't called. I have this crazy feeling they were sent to me by mistake." Syd covered her eyes with her hand and moaned.

"Stop already. Gifts like this aren't sent by mistake." Casey sat on the corner of the coffee table and looked down at Syd. "The man had a definite reason for sending them to you. Syd, if there's one thing I've learned, men don't spend money on women unless they want something in return. Trust me. He'll call."

Casey's reasoning made Syd's mind click into suspicious mode. Her friend was right. Men always had a reason, a motive for everything they did where women were concerned.

"So are you going to call him?" Casey asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because..." Syd sat up straight and studied the bouquet, sensing a rat in her midst once more. "I'm not so sure Alfred is the one who sent them."

"But if he didn't, who did?"

"Take one guess."

* * * *

Sydney studied her notes for the television segment she'd lined up with local anchor woman Vanessa Clausen of *Wake-Up, Omaha*. At least she could say there was one good thing that had come out of her tenure at Smythe and Jones—clout.

Syd had worked with Vanessa on a number of occasions while developing promotions for Stardust Lingerie. Vanessa loved unconventional endeavors, making Stardust Lingerie, and now, *Studs for Hire*, a perfect topic for the morning talk show host. But the woman was smooth, and past experience told Syd she needed to be prepared for anything and everything once the camera started rolling. Vanessa was known for her quick, quirky wit, and wasn't afraid to mix a little spice in with her questions.

With Vanessa's drawing power, and the unique concept of *Studs for Hire*, they were bound to be successful.

"Knock, knock," Terri said as she came into Syd's office. "I double checked with the vineyard. Everything is all set. They'll be here at ten-thirty Friday to set up for the grand opening celebration." She glanced at the steno pad she held. "And I picked up the business cards and the entry blanks from the printers this morning."

"Great. Did you have a chance to make out those gift certificates yet?"

"Working on them as we speak."

"Super. Everything is coming together nicely. Is there anything we're forgetting?"

"Not that I can think of." Terri took off her glasses and chewed on the tip of the bow in thought. "Oh, wait! I have a special delivery for you."

"Oh, not another one." Syd shoved aside the yellow legal pad she'd been using to write her to do list. "Please tell me it's not more flowers and lingerie."

"So sorry to disappoint you. It's nothing of the sort. But I have to say, I'd take this any day over flowers." Terri dropped a large manila envelope on Syd's desk.

"What's this? Is it safe to open?" She smiled and winked at her good friend.

"If you're asking if that envelope will explode in your face when you open it, well then I'd say that all depends upon the beholder."

"Terri, sometimes you confuse me."

"That makes two of us. But at least Thomas O'Malley understands me. Amazes me how smart that cat really is. Do you suppose he could be a reincarnate of Einstein or someone super smart?"

"I guess it's possible if you believe in that sort of thing. So what's in here?" Syd asked as she carefully picked up the package.

"Pictures. Your uncle Milford dropped them off a few minutes ago."

"Milford was here and he didn't come in to say hi? How dare he ignore me," she said good naturedly.

"He said to tell you he was running late and to extend his apologies. He mentioned something about meeting a woman down at the *French Café* for an early lunch."

"Sounds like a date. I hope it works out," Syd said as she undid the clasp on the envelope and lifted the flap. "Milf deserves a nice woman in his life."

"Your uncle is ninety-two and he's dating?" Terri groaned in frustration.

"Yep."

"Oh. Life is so unfair. A ninety-two-year-old man is out and painting the town while I, barely thirty, sit at home with my cat and watch TV murder shows every night. What am I doing wrong?"

"Milf likes to get out. And you have to get out in order to meet people, Terri," Syd said as she pulled a collection of eight by ten, black and white photos out of the envelope.

"I get out."

"Going to the grocery store doesn't count." Syd switched her attention to a brief note her uncle had attached to the photos. *Syd, hope these smolder enough for you! Love, Milf.* She removed the clip holding the contents together and froze. A handsome Trevor grinned up at her from the photographs.

"Whoa!" "Pretty nice, eh?" Terri said. "Kind of got an Elvis look going there. Trevor is very photogenic. And I like the level. Nice touch."

"Yeah. Nice touch," Syd said, stunned. "Milford did a fantastic job of capturing the feel I was looking for. There

isn't a bad picture in the bunch," she said as she flipped through the photos.

And they *smoldered*, all right. Heck, they were on fire.

"I have to admit the shots with the circular saw are the ones that do it for me," Terri continued. "Hot, hot, hot!" She fanned herself with her steno pad.

Yeah. Trevor Vanden Bosch was hot all right. Hotter than sin, to be exact. Dammit. He wasn't supposed to be so handsome, so irresistible, so ... sexy. But letting herself think like this was dangerous. Trevor was just another man in her life who had a motive. And she best not forget it. "I guess these will have to do," Syd said flatly.

"Have to do? You've got to be joking, Syd. These pics are incredible. Every woman in a hundred-mile radius will be calling wanting work done once they see Trevor. You've got to show these on *Wake-Up, Omaha*. Heck, I think I'll put my name on the list before it gets too long. I could use some shelves put in my hall closet."

Syd considered Terri's idea of showing Trevor's photos on TV and the more she thought about it, the more she liked. All this media attention was bound to help put the pressure on and force him to reveal what he was really doing here.

And the sooner the better—she thought silently as she gazed at his pictures—before she lost her heart for good.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Syd took a deep breath, picked up the phone and dialed Trevor's number with trembling fingers before she could change her mind. With the stage set for the big seduction scene, all she needed now was her dashing co-star.

The phone rang a half-a-dozen times before a husky voice came on the other end of the line. "Hello."

"Trev?"

"Yeah."

"It's Syd. Sorry, did I wake you?"

"Nah. I was just watching Conan O'Brien. I couldn't sleep."

"Good. Well, not that you can't sleep, but I'm glad I didn't wake you. Listen, I need to talk to you and wondered if you'd mind coming down to the office for a few minutes." The dull buzz of the phone line boomed in her ear as he failed to respond. Her throat tightened, her nerves twinged. He wasn't going to come. He was going to turn her down flat!

"Now?" he said at last.

"Yes. That is, if you don't mind."

"It's almost midnight, Syd. What's up? Is something wrong?"

"I fine. I'm sorry it's so late, but this really can't wait until morning." Syd hoped she didn't sound as breathless and panicked as she felt.

"Can we discuss it over the phone?"

Drat the man. Why did he have to make this so difficult? Didn't he have any idea how tough this was for her? Besides,

any other time he'd jump at the offer she presented him, but tonight, after she finally mustered up the courage to initiate an encounter, he had to be obstinate.

A terrible thought struck her. What if he wasn't alone? What if he was with a woman and they were in the middle of something ... something private? She gasped, nearly choking. Terri rushed to her aid and patted Syd on the back.

"Are you okay, Syd? What's that noise?" Trevor asked.

"Nothing. I'm fine," she coughed. "I got a tickle in my throat. So can you come? Or are you too busy?"

"Are you sure we can't discuss it on the phone?"

For crying out loud! "Not really. I need to show you something. Get your opinion."

"Do you need some help with advertising, because I think—"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I need. I'm stumped and I've got to get it to the printers tomorrow or it won't be ready in time for the grand opening," she fibbed.

"Ok. Give me about twenty minutes."

"Great." They said their goodbyes and she hung up the phone with a major sigh of relief. Her partners-in-crime stared at her, waiting. "He's coming."

"Marvelous." Casey clapped her hands together. "I'll light these last two candles and then we're out of here. Terri did you remember to turn off the ringers on all the phones and make sure the answering system is functioning?"

"Taken care of. And all the doors will be locked tight. You needn't worry about any interruptions."

"Ugh!" Syd laid her head down on her recently tidied desk. "I don't know about this. What if I screw up or worse yet, chicken out? I'll be even more of a laughingstock than I already am."

Casey and Terri exchanged glances that spoke pure exasperation. "We've been through this a hundred times, Syd," Casey said. "No one is going to think you're a laughingstock. Geesh! How many more pep talks do you need, anyway? Maybe I should ask around for the name of a good psychiatrist."

Syd plopped back against the cushiness of her office chair and raked her hands through her carefully styled hair. "Just because I don't have a lot of confidence with men, doesn't mean I need to see a shrink. No amount of pep talking could prepare me for this, so I might as well save the hundred bucks an hour fee."

"You look like you could use some help. You're a nervous wreck. You're shaking." Casey grabbed Syd's shaking hands. "You have to relax."

"Easy for you to say."

"Here, drink this fast," Terri said as she handed Syd a glass of champagne. "Things won't seem so bad then."

Syd downed the bubbly liquid in three gulps and Terri quickly refilled the glass. "Hey! Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Whatever works," Terri said. "If you feel relaxed, you'll be able to go with the flow. Let the atmosphere and the champagne carry you away."

"Such words of wisdom. When's the last time you seduced a man, Terri?"

"Well ... ah ... well there was this one time..." Syd and Casey gave their friend a, *we know better* glare. Terri threw up her hands in surrender. "All right, never! But that's beside the point."

"That's precisely the point. It's harder than you think."

"If you relaxed, it wouldn't be so damn hard!" Terri chided.

"You think it's so easy, then maybe you ought to be the one doing this."

"That's enough, you two. No more squabbling," Casey ordered. "Syd, you'll be fine. Terri's right. Drink some more champagne. It'll take the edge off." Casey gathered her purse and car keys. "Now let's go, Terri. I want to be far away from here before Trevor shows up. We don't want him to know we're involved in this."

"Gee, thanks. It's nice to know my two best friends are willing to shoulder the blame when this bombs," Syd said sarcastically.

"It won't bomb," Casey said as they headed for the door.

"Wish me luck?" Syd asked. She gave them a weak smile, silently begging them to stay.

"Good luck," they said in unison.

"Thanks."

"Don't forget to call after it's over," Casey said. "I don't care what time it is. I want to know every succulent detail."

"Call. Yes, I'll call."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Syd listened to her friends footsteps as they abandoned her on the battle field. Funny, but she never felt this alone before in her entire life.

* * * *

Trevor paced the concrete beside his truck, not certain he had enough guts to go through with this. After getting Syd's call, he'd decided that this would be as good a time as any to tell her the truth. Better to handle nasty messes as soon, and as quickly, as possible, lest he chicken out. And if he chickened out, he'd end up with a wrung neck. Of course, if he chucked the honesty bit, he'd end up with a wrung neck eventually anyway. No matter how he played it, this was a lose-lose situation.

But Milf was right. True love was worth taking a risk for. Sydnie was worth taking a risk.

Glancing at his watch, Trevor saw that he was five minutes late. She would be waiting for him inside, and if he knew Syd, she'd probably already started to wonder if he was gonna show.

He stepped up onto the sidewalk by the back door, then stopped. The minute he walked through that door, turning back was no longer an option.

Running for the state line sounded like a safe plan right about now. He could hang around the river boat casinos for a few days, maybe make a few bucks, and forget all about Smythe, Stardust Lingerie and Syd.

There was only one problem with that scenario. Forgetting about the first two items would be easy—but forgetting about Syd—why he might as well forget to breathe.

And as much as he hated to admit it, he wanted to see her again. He wanted to see her sweet smile, touch her silky hair and hear her intoxicating laughter.

He wanted to love her—for the rest of his life.

Dammit. Love wasn't supposed to have anything to do with his mission. Getting Sydnie's ideas for the bra, making Mars happy and keeping his boss happy, were all he needed to concern himself with right now.

"Then why can't you stop thinking about her?" he mumbled. All day long, Milford's words of advice kept drumming through his head like an irritating song, *love is worth the risk, love is worth the risk*, driving his conscience nearly insane.

A set of headlights beamed bright in the night, then swooped across the darkness as a car turned into a nearby parking lot, reminding Trevor he lurked in the shadows by the backdoor. Time to either go in or get in his truck and drive off before someone saw him and called the cops.

Letting his conscience rule, Trevor unlocked the door and made his way through the now familiar hallway. He reached Syd's office and much to his surprise, found an array of candles burning on the coffee table. The scent of eucalyptus filled the air, and soft jazz music played on the stereo.

A sense of *deja vu* hit him head-on and a quake in his stomach told him he was in serious trouble here. *Should have headed for the state line.*

He scanned the room, but flickering shadows from the dozen or so candles made it difficult for him to see much beyond their circle of light.

Syd stepped into the glow of the candlelight and Trevor inhaled as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him. She had something to show him all right, like how fast his body could go from zero to feverish.

The simple navy blue camisole dress she wore was the beginning of a man's sexual fantasy about to come true. The satiny fabric shimmered like sapphires when she moved, highlighting every single curve of her body, and the thin spaghetti straps accentuated her deliciously bare shoulders.

Her red curls tumbled freely about her face, making her look almost wanton in the faint light. His heart rhythm increased as his gaze followed the length of her body down to her long, tan legs and all the way to her painted toenails.

Oh, boy. Serious trouble.

Now what should he do? A low moan escaped his throat as he yearned for things that could never be between them. Under normal circumstances they'd be so right, so perfect for each other. Unfortunately, these weren't normal circumstances.

On the bright side, this could really be his lucky day if she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Trevor's common sense yelled otherwise. Syd was known to keep a few tricks of her own up her sleeve and she had an uncanny knack for knowing just the right time to put them to use.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Last time he'd caught her dancing in her skivvies truly by accident. But this ... this was a whole different deal. This love-den she'd created was a deliberate ploy to enslave him.

Sydney was on the hunt.

And Trevor was her prey.

He should be the happiest man in the world, but she obviously suspected he was up to something, or he wouldn't be standing here, loitering in her doorway.

Not good. Nope. Not good at all.

Well, before she had the chance to blow his mind, then blow the whistle on him, he'd come clean. Trevor took a deep breath and stiffened his resolve, hating like hell what he'd come here to do. He needed to be strong and not think about the scrumptious visions of smooth legs and beautiful breasts she created.

But how the heck did a guy focus on spilling his guts when the woman of his dreams looked like she'd stepped out of the pages of a slick magazine?

Mars was right.

Sydney was their Venus.

"Hello, Trevor," she said, her voice low and smooth as fine silk.

"Oh, hi," he said, embarrassed she'd caught him daydreaming. "Sorry I'm late." He ventured a few steps into the room, then stopped, afraid to go any farther. The farther into the room he went, the deeper in trouble he knew he was going to get.

"That's okay. Come on in. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine."

She walked over to where he stood frozen like a block of ice. Teasingly she ran a finger down the length of his arm, sending a rope of heat fusing through his body. "Ah, come on, Trev. You look like you could use something to take the edge off."

How about a tranquilizer? "Yeah. I guess I could."

She presented him with a heart-stopping smile, then walked to the refrigerator. Trevor marveled at the soft sway of her hips as she moved and he enjoyed the view as she bent over to pull a bottle of champagne out of the fridge.

Oh, yeah. Serious, serious trouble.

She grabbed two glasses from the counter and the flutes clinked together like wind chimes as she made her way toward the couch.

"Do you mind?" she asked, handing him the bottle of champagne. "I'm not very good at opening these. They scare me."

"They're not that hard." Trevor clasped the cool bottle and their fingers touched for a mere second before he jerked away. Allowing any kind of physical contact between them was a major mistake.

And, oh, like drinking champagne with her in a candlelit room with her wearing not much more than a slip, wasn't a major mistake?

He removed the foil and the wire basket from the top of the bottle anyway, instead of running for the door like he ought to. With a push of his thumb, he sent the plastic cork sailing into the air with a loud pop. The cork ricocheted off the

ceiling with a thud and landed in the bouquet of exotic flowers.

"Sorry." He shrugged. "Guess my aim's a little off."

"It's okay," she said, picking the cork off of a red blossom. "I'm sure these flowers have served their purpose."

Trevor's fingers slipped on the smooth flute as he poured the champagne, nearly dropping the glass, the bottle, and his jaw onto the carpet.

Damn. The gig was up.

"Whoa, easy there, pardner," Syd said as she caught the bottle before it crashed to the floor. "That stuff is expensive. You seem kind of nervous tonight, Trev. Are you okay?" she asked as she finished pouring the champagne for them. She handed him a glass and her fingers covered his. Much to the discomfort of his overactive libido, she played her bottom lip between her teeth. Trevor nodded and struggled to restrain a rumble of desire deep in his throat. He hoped like heck he could regain some control here. So far he wasn't doing a very good job.

"Are you sure you're okay? Looks to me like you could use a little of that R & R you keep talking about."

"Nah. I'm fine. The bottle was slick and just slipped. Look, Syd," he said, forging ahead before he lost what nerve he did have left. "I think we should—"

"Have sex," she finished for him.

Ah, hell. That was the last thing he expected her to say. Why was she doing this to him?

"Ah, well ... Gee." Trevor downed his champagne in one gulp. Syd stepped closer and the subtle scent of vanilla and

honey teased his nose. Ever so slowly, she smoothed her hand in an up and down motion against his chest. Tingles of fire pulsed through him. The smile she bestowed upon him spoke pure eroticism and he read the longing in her eyes that glistened like emeralds.

Time for a reality check, Vanden Bosh. He should go, but his feet failed to budge. The word *doomed* flashed in his mind like a cheap neon sign.

"You want to have sex as bad as I do, Trev. And don't bother denying it." She brushed her lips along his jaw and whispered, "your face doesn't lie." Her hand skimmed over his chest and then down low to the button of his jeans. She paused for a few seconds before continuing on lower until she reached his solidness. He inhaled sharply at the jolting contact. "And neither does your body."

Mercy, she didn't know how right she was. He set down his glass and clasped her creamy shoulders. The urge to pull her snug against him fought with his better judgment. This was wrong. No matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't make love to her under these circumstances.

He'd lied to her, used her. She deserved better than the likes of him.

Silently, Trevor cursed his boss. Why did Charles Smythe always end up standing between them? He cupped her smooth cheeks between his hands and prayed he could get through this. Make her understand.

"Syd—"

"Sshh." She placed a finger against his lips. "I know you're thinking about the past and the future repercussions if we do

this, but let that all go. For this one night, forget everything and let us to be together. Right now, yesterday and tomorrow no longer matter."

Sydney brushed her finger along his bottom lip, inviting him to embrace the pleasures she granted. He took her offering into his mouth and the salacious act sent the last millimeter of his resolve slipping away.

Pulling her snug against him, he discovered her body fit his as perfectly as any could. A raw, primal hunger like he'd never known, consumed every last rational thought he had left.

His lips captured hers and they gave into the demands raging between them.

Sydney encircled his neck with her arms, throwing his balance off slightly. They toppled backwards a few steps until her back pressed against the doorjamb of the open closet door. Her hands raked through his hair, stoking an already scorching fire. With one swift movement, he lifted the silk dress up over her head, only to find the Starry Night Blue Torsolette, and a pair of garter belts and stockings standing in his way.

"Hmm. Garter belts. My favorite," he drawled as he slipped an index finger beneath a silky strap. Sydney gasped as Trevor traced a scorching trail along her inner thigh with his thumb, not stopping until he found the lace of the thong. He pushed the fabric aside and eased his fingers into the folds of her delicate womanhood.

Her head tipped to one side in languid bliss and Trevor seized the opportunity to nibble at the hollow of her throat. The spicy scent of him assailed her sensibilities.

This plan of hers was working all right. So well in fact that she was on the brink of entering forbidden territory.

Trevor kissed her again full on the mouth and she wondered if maybe all of this was nothing more than the wild fantasy she'd dreamt so often.

"I want you," he murmured against the base of her throat, reminding her this was indeed very real. The raw desire she heard in his voice told her he spoke the truth. "I can't deny it anymore, Syd. You know it's driving us both crazy."

"Yes," she managed to whisper.

Trevor was right. This desire was driving her crazy. She craved, ached for the fulfillment of his body joined with hers. Now, what she'd longed for for months, was within her reach, and no matter what the outcome, she refused to let this chance slip through her grasp.

Consequences be damned.

Impatient for the heat of his skin against her own, she tore at the buttons of his denim shirt, freeing them all in one yank. She placed her hands on his bare chest and kneaded his flesh with her fingertips. His muscles tensed and flexed in response to her ravenous touch. The rapid beat of his heart pounded beneath her palms and shot straight to her own heart. Sydnie wrenched the shirt from his shoulders and tossed the garment aside.

In answer to her demands, Trevor freed the garter belts holding up her stockings. He knelt before her and quickly

rolled the sheer stockings down her legs. Her knees weakened from his fiery touch and she stumbled backwards into the closet.

"Uh-oh," she cried as Trevor attempted to hold her steady. But her sudden shift in weight knocked him off balance and he tumbled in after her, trapping her between him and the wall. Hangers clanked together and fell to the carpeted floor with a dull pinging sound.

A soft laugh escaped his throat.

"What's so funny?" she asked between breaths.

"This." He smiled against her cheek, then gently kissed her there. "We have a habit of getting out of control in odd places."

"Yeah, we do," she managed to say.

Out of control was an understatement.

This seduction scene was going farther than she'd ever intended. Her carnal answers to his body's questions weren't a part of the plan. She was the one who was supposed to take Trevor to the brink, not the other way around. But planned or not, this fire burning between them was blazing hotter with every glance, every touch, every kiss, and she didn't have a notion on how to extinguish the flames.

Nor did she want to. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had ever felt so right.

She only prayed Trevor felt the same and he didn't stop what was about to happen between them like the last time.

The whisper of his fingers along the swell of her breast tore at any strength she might have left to put an end to this madness.

An intense passion sparked in the depths of his whisky brown eyes and she knew then at that moment, she was lost. "Trevor. Promise me you won't leave me like last time," she said around a lump in her throat.

"Ah, my sweet, Sydnie. I'd never make a mistake like that twice. Wild horses couldn't drag me away." Trevor kissed her cheeks, her neck, and the tops of her breasts.

And she knew in her heart that he spoke the truth. "Make love to me, Trevor."

"My pleasure, my enchanting, Venus," he said as he worked the hooks-and-eyes free on the torsolette and with a tinge of persuasion, the garment fell away to the floor. He continued where he'd left off with his blazing trail of kisses and made his way down to her belly button.

How could such ecstasy be such torture, she wondered. She didn't know how much longer she could endure this.

A low sigh escaped her throat, and Sydnie spread her fingers through the swirl of dark hair peppering his chest. Astonished by the wondrous, magical feeling of his skin against hers, she explored further and marveled at the strength in his muscles. She never wanted him to let go of her. She wanted him to protect her, and love her—always.

He stilled and Syd glanced down to see he'd spied the gold condom package she'd tucked under the strap of her thong.

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"With you around, I like to be prepared."

He looked up at her and smiled. He got to his feet and she reached for the brass button on his jeans. Boldly she popped

the snap and unzipped them in a rush, then snaked the jeans down his lean hips.

His hands cupped her derriere and he groaned with pleasure. "Hmm. A thong, eh?" he murmured as he slipped a finger under the satiny strap and removed the condom. "Do you know you're the most incredible creature I've ever met?"

"Trevor, please," she begged, snatching the condom from him. She ripped the package and pulled out the small piece of latex. Desire spurring her on, she sheathed him before he could tell her no.

"Whoa," he drawled as her fingers wrapped around him. "I wanted you the first moment I saw you." He swept a strand of hair away from her face. "It seems like I've been waiting forever to touch you like this. I haven't had a good night's sleep in months."

"Trevor..." Of all the times he wanted to talk.

He removed the last piece of lingerie hiding her body from his view. Sydnie inhaled sharply, startled by the feel of him as he pressed his hard masculinity against her.

No man had affected every sense of her being, every fiber of her soul, every ounce of her body, like Trevor.

Small beads of sweat glistened on his skin in the shadowy light and she tasted the saltiness against her tongue as she laved kisses on his shoulder, down his powerful arm and to his palm.

"Are you sure about this, Syd?" he asked as her lips lingered at the base of his wrist. She looked up at him and their gazes locked and held.

"Positive."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

His hand slid across her belly and traced a path down the inside of her thigh, teasing and taunting as he went. His feverish touch renewed her strength and she stood on tiptoe, silently begging him to take her.

Trevor granted her request and lifted her up onto his hips by clasping her bare bottom with his hands. Her legs encircled him and held tight. Her back pressed against the cool wall, she welcomed every fiery inch of him into the envelope of her body.

Her fingers stroked and clawed at his shoulders at the same time. Begging, demanding more. And Trevor answered her call.

Sydney gasped and a moan of ecstasy escaped her lips as he rocked her hips hard against the wall with each sensuous stroke he took.

Together they crossed the universe, shattering into a million spellbinding stars.

The blinding fever appeased for the moment, they tumbled to the floor, entangled in each other. Trevor spied a blanket lying on the floor beside them and he folded its softness beneath Sydney's head.

Together they lay, basking in the heat of their torrid lovemaking.

"Got any more of those condoms?" he asked with contentment in his voice.

"Sure do."

"Good."

"Why?" she asked, feigning innocence.

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"Because, we're going to need every last one of them." He trailed kisses along her jaw and down to her collar bone before reaching one taut coral nipple. He took her into his mouth and gave her a whole new kind of pleasure.

"Ooh!" she said with breathy voice. "That's a lot. It's a brand-new box."

He took the second nipple into his mouth, bestowing it with the same courtesies as the first. "Okay, maybe not that many," he said between kisses. "But I guarantee we'll make a hell've a dent in the supply."

"Promise?"

"Oh, yeah," he said as he pulled her over on top of him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trevor forced his eyes open and realized that he was lying on the couch and a sleepy Sydnie dozed on top of him. Sometime during the night, amongst several rounds of lovemaking in the closet, on the desk, and on the floor, they'd managed to make their way to the couch. Still not the most comfortable place for two lovers to crash, but it beat the commercial carpeting.

At some point, Trevor had draped a red and green fleece blanket over them to ward off the coolness of the air conditioner. He smiled, knowing they didn't need a blanket a few short hours ago.

He tried to move and stretch his tight muscles without disturbing Sydnie, but a cramp knotted in the calf of his leg. Great. Here he was in the best position a guy could ask for and he had to get a leg cramp. Time to get up and move around or end up in excruciating pain.

"Syd," he said softly, nudging her shoulder. "Syd, honey. I need you to wake up."

A soft moan rumbled from deep in her throat. She wiggled and stretched like a cat waking up from a long winter nap. Her smooth leg brushed against his rougher one as she moved and his body reacted in spite of being tired beyond belief. He had to admit—he wasn't used to making love half the night.

The pain in his leg increased and he jerked.

"Whoa. What was that?" Syd asked sleepily as she looked at him through a mass of curls.

"I've got a cramp in my leg. I need you to move," he said, pain in his voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She plopped down onto the floor, pulling the blanket with her leaving Trevor with nothing but the suit he was born in. "Here." She tossed him his jeans and he quickly slipped them on, then stood. "Try walking on it. They say that helps."

"But it hurts like hell." He stomped his foot on the floor and grimaced. He limped forward a few steps.

"You get leg cramps a lot, Trev. Maybe you're low on potassium."

"I don't think a mineral or vitamin deficiency has anything to do with it," he groaned as he hobbled around the room.

"Then what is it?"

"Us. I never had any trouble until you and I began making out in odd places."

Her laughter filled the room and for a moment he forgot about his pain. She sat there cross legged, hugging the blanket snug around her. What an amazing creature she was.

"Oh, Trev," she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I'm glad you think this is funny," he said with an indulgent smile.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I keep thinking about what that kid told us in the parking lot the other day."

"We're not that old, Syd. In fact, we're still in our sexual prime. Or at least I like to think we are."

"Oh, I know that. It's just funny, is all."

Trevor worked his way over to the closet and saw the hangers, boxes and miscellaneous odds and ends scattered about. "This place is kind of a mess. Kind of looks like a tornado whipped through here."

"One did. Don't you remember? On the Fujita scale, I'd say it was an F5." She rose, readjusting the blanket around her as she did. She walked over to him and cupped his cheek with her hand. He placed a kiss on the delicate flesh of her wrist and inhaled the delicious honey scent of her. She rewarded him with an enthralling smile and his heart did a double take in his chest.

Her unruly hair tumbled out of control and he brushed a curl away from her face. She positively glowed with a joy that could only come from making love with someone she cared about. Her eyes spoke volumes, telling him what he didn't deserve to know.

She loved him.

The revelation made him wish that the precious moments they'd shared here in her office would never come to an end. That they could love and live on their own terms, in their own quiescent world.

But it did have to end. The morning sun would soon spoil it all by rising above the horizon, forcing them back into the realities of the harsh day-to-day world they shared.

Like his lies.

A pang of regret jabbed at his soul. He'd come here last night to set the record straight and admit his guilt—but instead he'd ended up compounding the situation between them even more.

Only a scumbag used a woman the way he'd done.

Yeah, Trevor Vanden Bosch was a scumbag.

Making love with Sydnie was off limits. Taboo. He'd made that unwritten rule for himself the minute he agreed to this whole crazy charade.

But he'd failed. And failed miserably at adhering to his own rules, listening to his own advice. Now he needed to find a way to right the wrongs and spare both their hearts in the process.

The first step in that direction was dealing with Charles Smythe.

"Let me help you clean this up," he said, breaking the physical contact between them.

"No. Don't worry about it. I can get it. I've been meaning to straighten that closet anyway. When we moved in, I just piled a lot of stuff in there. I didn't take the time to sort and organize like I usually do."

"Are you sure? I'd be happy to help. I'm good at sorting and pitching."

"It's fine really."

"Okay. Well, if you don't mind, I think I'll go home and catch a shower."

"You could take one here," she said as she traced a finger suggestively along his thigh. Even through the denim of his jeans, he could feel the heat of her touch. Oh, what a tempting offer she'd made. He'd love nothing more than to feel her body against his once more, only this time moist with water and slick with soap. But those arousing images were

best left for another time. After there were no more secrets between them. He just prayed that day would come.

"I'd love to, Syd. But can I have a rain check?"

Disappointment clouded her eyes. He cupped her face and rubbed the pad of his thumb along her cheek. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I really need a change of clothes. And I have a few things to take care of this morning before I report to work. I can't be late again or the boss will have my head," he teased. The smile returned to her face.

"Damn right I will. It states right on page five of your employees' handbook that chronic tardiness will not be tolerated. And don't think that because you're sleeping with the boss, you get special privileges."

"Yes, ma'am." He gave her a mock salute. He stepped away and picked up his shirt and dug his socks out of the debris littering the floor.

"Do try not to be long. We've got a few jobs on deck for today. And besides..." She grabbed his hand and pulled him next to her. "I'll miss you." She kissed him full on the mouth, making promises of more to come.

"I'll do my best. But I'm not sure how long I'll be," he said as he tucked in his shirt and zipped up his jeans.

"Anything serious? Can I help?"

Trevor stiffened at her words. Yeah. It was serious all right. Their lives, their futures, were at stake. Sydnie had already helped him more than she knew by giving him the courage, the backbone, to never be a manipulated pawn in a one-sided chess match again.

"Nah. I can manage." He pulled on his boots and strode toward the door, putting distance between them.

"Trevor?"

"Yeah?" He turned and saw the hope, the fear, in the depths of her green eyes.

"Promise me you'll come back."

There was no doubt about that. He'd be back. But the question was, would she take him back once this was over?

"I promise," he said, then hurried down the hall.

* * * *

"All right. What happened?" Casey asked as she and Terri hurried through Syd's office door. "Are you all right? You didn't call like you were supposed to. And you didn't go home."

Syd quickly blew out the last two candles, hoping her friends wouldn't notice they were still burning, and hurried and finished buttoning her shirt. "How do you know I didn't go home?" she asked innocently.

"It's six in the morning," Casey said. "You never come in this early, and look at you. You're lit up like a Christmas tree. A person doesn't need to be a genius to figure out what that means." Casey picked up one of the candles. "Besides, these are still warm."

"We saw Trevor pulling out of the lot as we were coming down the street," Terri added. "Now fess up."

"All right." Syd threw up her hands and paced the floor. "The plan worked. Worked so well that it backfired on me."
"Backfired?"

"I seduced him, he seduced me, and as they say, the rest is history." Sydnie moaned and plunked down on the couch. "So much for leaving him on the brink of sexual frustration."

"So, now what?" Terri asked.

"You know. I can't believe I have no will power." Syd buried her head in her hands. "I did exactly what I told myself I couldn't do. And wouldn't do. Why do men have to be as tempting as chocolate?"

"So how was Trevor when he left?" Casey asked.

"Happy as man can be after a night of mind-blowing sex," she said even though she wasn't quite sure of that fact. He'd seemed distracted. And that scared her. "At least I think it was mind-blowing."

"And you? Are you happy about what happened between you two?"

"Yes. I mean, no! I know this was supposed to be a retribution scheme, but it was so great, I don't know what to feel. It's kind of like having a rebel boyfriend. You can't help but love him, and you can't wait to be with him, but you pray your parents never find out because they'll lecture for hours on how bad he is for you. And deep down inside you know they're right, but you can't help yourself." Syd raked her fingers through her hair. "Why does this have to be so complicated? I mean, why can't I just meet a guy, fall in love and live happily ever after? Tell me why there has to be so much emotional baggage with relationships."

"Because that's life," Casey said.

"So, did you find out what he's here for?" Terri asked, refocusing the conversation.

Syd's cheeks warmed, hating like heck to admit to her friends she'd failed in her mission.

"No," she mumbled from behind the cover of a pillow.

"You mean you don't know any more now than you did last night?" Terri asked in disbelief.

"But, Syd, we went over this. That was the whole purpose, well, part of the purpose, of the plan," Casey said.

"I know. But things got ... carried away. I kissed him, he kissed me, we started tearing at each other's clothes, and the next thing I knew, we were in the closet."

"The closet?!" Terri said excitedly. "So that explains this mess. I thought maybe you two had an argument and you were throwing stuff at each other. Sex in a closet. That's hot!"

"Yeah, it was." Syd couldn't help but a grin. "But." She waved her hands in dismissal. "Before you get ideas to quiz me like I'm on *Jeopardy*, forget it. I'm not answering any more questions. A girl has a right to some privacy when she's in love."

There, she'd said the four letter word. L-o-v-e. Amazing, but it didn't hurt as badly as she'd thought it would.

Of course, given time, Murphy's Law would take care of that for her.

"I knew it," Casey said. "You've had that *in love* look on your face since we walked in."

"I think it's romantic," Terri said.

It was romantic all right. Tragically romantic.

* * * *

Alfred Mars struggled to focus his attention on the big screen TV and not the ache in his legs as he bulldozed his way through the last quarter mile on the treadmill. Each morning he ran five miles in the comfort of his personally designed workout room and watched *Wake-Up, Omaha* as the sun came up over the Missouri River.

Keeping up on the latest happenings in the city that boasted some of the world's most famous steaks was as much of a requirement as his power breakfast of oatmeal, fruit and one egg over easy.

The treadmill's computer program shifted into a lower gear and Alfred slowed his pace to a fast walk. At last—he was on the home stretch.

Vanessa Clausen, the co-host of *Wake-Up, Omaha* returned to the screen after a commercial break, and Alfred couldn't help but smile knowing that under that white silky blouse of hers, she wore some of Stardust Lingerie's finest. Outfitting Omaha's most popular, sexy blond with a vast collection from his Celestial line of lingerie was just another one of Sydnie Riley's brilliant marketing strategies. From the first day Vanessa had started wearing Stardust Lingerie and raving about it on the air, the sales at his Omaha stores skyrocketed.

"This morning during our Omaha Business segment," Vanessa said with that sultry voice of hers, "we're turning our attention to a new business that promises to make the entire female population of Douglas County and the surrounding areas hyperventilate.

"What could be so powerful, you ask? Is it an aphrodisiac? Well, not in the material sense of the word. It's Studs for Hire. If you are in need of carpentry, electrical, or plumbing work done around your home, Studs for Hire is the number to call. Not only can you get your handyman work done at a competitive price, you get a nice view in the process. What do I mean by a *nice view*? Let me show you.

"I recently had the opportunity to visit with one of the partners of Studs for Hire and learn more about this innovative company."

The scene switched from Vanessa "live" in the studio, to a taped segment of Vanessa on assignment. "I'm standing in front of an Omaha venture that looks like just another typical business," Vanessa said on a bright, sunny morning. "But behind this door," the camera panned to a glass door off to her left, "awaits some of the hottest, sexist handymen you'll ever have the pleasure of calling." The camera zoomed in on the red lettering covering the top half of the door. "Studs for Hire," she crooned.

"Here with me this morning is the founder and president of Studs for Hire, Sydnie Riley."

"Sydnie Riley?!" Alfred froze. The treadmill belt pulled beneath his feet and dumped him off the back end of the machine. "Damn," he said as he waved his arms in huge circles, struggling to regain his balance.

"Good morning, Sydnie."

"Good morning, Vanessa."

Alfred grabbed the towel hanging on the weight machine and wiped away the trails of sweat coating his face. He

blinked, then blinked again. Sure as hell, he saw *his* Sydnie on the television.

"Sydnie, tell us a little bit about how you got the idea for Studs for Hire."

"Sure, Vanessa. My dad owns a large contracting firm here in Omaha, Riley and Sons, so I've grown up around the construction business. After years of being trounced on in the advertising business by greedy, male chauvinistic co-workers, I decided to venture out on my own. I wanted to live the American Dream of being my own boss."

"Own boss?" Alfred mumbled. "What the hell is she talking about?" He grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

"So, are you saying that Studs for Hire is a ploy to get even with men? You and your business partners *are* all women."

"Of course not, Vanessa," Sydnie said through what looked like to Alfred, a forced smile. "Studs for Hire is a legitimate business that offers handymen who can handle any home repair problem at a fair, reasonable price. Yes, we are targeting the female market, but our reason for doing this is that statistics prove women are more likely to be ripped off by unscrupulous repair people than men are. Women needn't be afraid of paying double, or even in some cases, triple, because they happen to be a female. We just decided to offer an extra bonus for our clients—sexy men."

"Be honest here, Sydnie. Don't you think the name, *Studs for Hire* might give people the wrong impression? Aren't you afraid they might think you're running a breeding farm here?"

"This isn't stallion row, Vanessa," Sydnie laughed. "Our company policy is to deliver quality work at a fair price. What woman wouldn't want her handyman work done by someone she can trust?"

"And drool over," Vanessa drawled. "Some of the men you've got working for you could easily make the Chippendale cut."

"That's true. But I do want to emphasize that although the plumber fixing your sink might be sexy-as-sin, he'll do the job right the first time and not over charge you."

"Take a look at this one, ladies." Vanessa held up a black and white photo of Trevor clutching a level. "He could be Mel Gibson's brother. Tell us who *this* stud is, Sydnie."

"This is Trevor Vanden Bosch, one of our carpenters."

"What the hell?" Alfred did a double take and scurried to the TV to get a better look.

"My! He certainly could check my outlets anytime," Vanessa said as she fanned herself with Trevor's photo.

"Sorry, Vanessa. Trevor isn't an electrician. He's a carpenter. He can take care of any minor or major remodeling job you have."

"Really," Vanessa drawled. "He makes me want to move out of my apartment and buy a house so I can hire him."

"I'd like to mention that we're having a grand opening blitz this next weekend. Be sure and stop by to register our drawing. We're giving away some fabulous prizes, including eight hours of free labor with Trevor. That's a great way to get started on that remodeling project you've been dreaming about."

"Dreaming is right," Vanessa remarked.

Sydney shot the host a cross-eyed glance and continued. "Also while at our grand opening, you can taste some wine from one of Nebraska's premier vineyards, get home improvement ideas, and meet all the guys."

The scene switched back to Vanessa "live" in the studio. "I know I'll be there," Vanessa said to her co-host, Matt Price.

"Sounds like an *interesting* time. Vanessa, do they plan to start a Fillies for Hire, for us men?" Matt joked.

"I don't know. I didn't ask." The camera switched angles and Vanessa pivoted on her chair. "So remember ladies, hop in your cars and hurry on down to Studs for Hire this weekend. They're located next to the Westgate Plaza on Eighty-Fourth Street."

Alfred switched off the TV, stunned. He ran a hand over his clean-shaven head, totally baffled by what he'd just seen. None of this made sense. Sydney was away visiting her ill grandmother.

But she wasn't.

Realization hit him with the force of a hurricane. "Damn!" He hit his fist against a bar on his weight machine.

And odds were, she wasn't working on his ad campaign either! That would explain Vanden Bosch's hesitation. And the delays.

"She's off running her own business," he growled. "She's too busy being her own boss to care about my account."

And what about Trevor? What role exactly was he playing in this? Was he working for Sydney? Or was he just lending a hand, helping her get started?

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

Or was there more to it? Maybe they were involved. Trevor's behavior the other day suggested the possibility. Alfred's fists tightened. The thought of Sydnie being with Vanden Bosch ruffled more than a few of his feathers.

Alfred was hopping mad.

He'd been lied to.

He'd been cheated.

And dammit—Smythe and Jones played him for a fool. He couldn't believe he'd been so blind. Their excuse for Sydnie's absence was so obvious now.

Well, thanks to Vanessa, his eyes were wide open.

"Nobody jerks me around and gets away with it," he growled. Snapping the towel against the TV, he stormed from the room. There was going to be hell to pay at Smythe and Jones.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Trevor nursed a glass of Smythe's prized brandy as he waited for his boss to return from the golf course. After spending the last two hours cleaning out his office and loading his car with his belongings, he deserved one last drink on Smythe and Jones. The company owed him a hell of a lot more than a measly brandy after all he'd sacrificed in the name of the job, but he'd take what he could get.

Well, no more sacrificing for the bigwigs. Today was the day Trevor ceased to be involved in the unscrupulous business dealings of Charles Smythe and his cohorts. Sydnie's courage to fight back in spite of the cost inspired him to do the same. At the time, he'd disagreed with her decision to resign from the agency, but his convictions hadn't affected his admiration for her spunk and fortitude.

The girl had guts. And he'd always loved her for it.

Now, he fully understood her reasons for leaving. He'd learned the feel of the shoes she'd been forced to wear, and he didn't like the fit. Once again Sydnie had reminded him of something that he'd always known, but chose to ignore. Morals and scruples were fast becoming extinct in the corporate business world.

Today marked *his* turn to leave on his own terms, not those of a boss who cared nothing for the people who served under him.

Being his own boss meant Trevor was only limited by his ambitions, his desires. But it pained him to know that he

faced the very real possibility Sydnie wouldn't be a part of his future success. And without her in his life to share his accomplishments, it all somehow seemed pointless.

Vanden Bosch Advertising had a nice ring to it, he thought as he took another drink. And in time, he could give Smythe and Jones a serious run for their money. The idea of putting the agency he'd devoted the last five years of his life to, out of business, was a bittersweet thought.

Trevor glanced around the posh office Smythe coveted so. The physical reminders of how Smythe had risen to such heights, forced Trevor to the brink of nausea. The man had built the agency on ruthless, unfair business practices, not caring who he hurt in the process.

One of the many casualties of Smythe's butchery was Sydnie. And now she could add Trevor as the man who'd inflicted more than one of her battle scars.

Lingering memories of the night they'd spent together filled his mind. The mischievous glint in her eye, the innocent, yet powerful smiles she'd given him, all made his blood simmer as hot as did the feel of her firm curvaceous body against his own.

The sound of a door opening drew Trevor's attention away from his thoughts. Smythe strode into the room, irritation clearly etched in the creases of his face.

"This better be important to warrant yanking me off the golf course, Vanden Bosch. I had a hellish game going." Smythe glanced at the glass in Trevor's hand and scowled. "Into my private stock, I see. Do we have cause to celebrate?"

"Yeah. I guess you could say that. I figured one last round was in order."

Smythe hustled over to the bar, clearly missing the jest of Trevor's words. He poured himself a glass of the brandy Trevor had left in the middle of the counter.

"Mars loved the layouts, didn't he?" Smythe asked. "We're set to go on another successful campaign, am I right?" When Trevor failed to answer, Smythe took a huge swallow and refilled their glasses for another round.

"He loved the layouts," Trevor said at last. Watching Smythe sweat gave him a sense of satisfaction. "He loved the whole campaign, in fact. But..." Trevor paused for effect.

Smythe froze and stared at Trevor through slitted eyes. "But what? Tell me you didn't screw up the deal."

"I didn't screw up. You did."

"Me?! What the hell are you getting at?"

"I cautioned you to be straight with Mars from the very beginning. Now it's too late."

"Don't play mind games with me. Tell me straight. What happened?"

"He found out the truth." Trevor watched the color drain from Smythe's face.

"What truth?" Smythe asked even though he knew full well what Trevor was referring to.

Trevor almost laughed at the man's arrogance. Instead, he downed the last of his drink, then set the crystal tumbler on the cherry desk with a thud. "Sydney's media blitz for Studs for Hire started today."

Smythe eased himself into a chair as if he were a frail, old man. "And the account?"

"Lost."

"Lost?! What the hell is the matter with you?" Smythe raked his fingers through his thinning hair. "You could have done something to prevent losing the account," he accused. "Your incompetence blew the deal and now I'm out a million."

Trevor shook his head in disgust. All that mattered to Smythe was the money. He would never change, no matter the outcome of his schemes. He'd always cheat and lie. And when he failed, he chose to lay the blame on one of the many scapegoats of his universe.

"Mars was bound to find out sooner or later. It was inevitable."

"You should have worked faster. Got in, got the information and got out. Instead you couldn't resist falling in bed with the hussy," he spat.

Trevor reached Smythe in two strides and jerked the man to his feet by the front of his expensive polo shirt. "Don't you dare call Sydnie a hussy, you son-of-a-bitch! She saved your ass so many times, I can't count. All you gave her was ridicule, embarrassment and the boot. She's the best damn thing that ever happened to this agency, and you threw her away like a piece of your high-priced trash."

"Protective, aren't we?" Smythe mocked. "She must have got you good. Always figured she'd be good for at least one night of sex."

Trevor's fist met Smythe's jaw in one bone-crushing punch, ramming him down onto the floor.

Smythe stared up at Trevor in utter shock. He brushed his fingers across his lips and paled at the blood he found there.

"You're fired!"

"You can't fire me because I quit. My letter of resignation is on your desk." Trevor tossed a set of keys at the man sprawled on the floor at his feet.

"What are these for?"

"The truck." Trevor turned his back on the man who'd robbed him of everything he'd held dear, and strode toward the door. He twisted the doorknob in his grasp. "I'm starting my own ad agency, so you'd better hang onto that pile of rust," he said over his shoulder. "You're going to need something to drive when my new ad agency puts you out of business."

* * * *

"Sydnie!" a deep raspy voice bellowed.

Syd jumped in her chair and dropped her pencil. She looked up and shot to her feet. "Alfred?! What a surprise. It's great to see you," she said genuinely pleased. She remembered the flowers and the card attached—*don't call me. I'll call you*. So Alfred had sent the bouquet after all, and instead of calling, he'd come to see her.

A wave of relief washed over her as she realized she'd been wrong in assuming Trevor had sent the gift for his own gain. She hurried around her desk and over to Alfred.

She extended her hand, but he didn't move his fists from his hips, failing to accept her gesture. "I want to thank you for—"

"I saw you on *Wake-Up, Omaha* this morning," he said, his voice heavy with disapproval. "What's up with that?"

"You saw it?" She planed her hands down her jeans, sensing that for some reason he wasn't pleased about the segment. "Well, what do you think? Have we got a winner here, or what?!" she said with a nervous laugh. She didn't know what to make of Alfred's stony features and the tense muscle working at his jaw. She'd never seen this side of the pro wrestler before.

"I think you should be working on my advertising campaign instead of running a stud service," he chided, copying Vanessa's comment on the breeding farm versus contacting service issue.

Syd's defenses kicked in, but she rounded up her grit and reined them in before she said something she'd regret. "This isn't a stud service in the way in which you are implying, Alfred. I thought the segment made that perfectly clear."

"Oh, I know that." He waved off her concern. "But I don't appreciate you taking valuable time away from my account to work on this instead. My account is supposed to always be your top priority. Is there a problem at the agency? Don't they pay you enough? Do you have to moonlight with a second career?"

"I'm not moonlighting. This is my full-time job now. I'm a co-owner of Studs for Hire. I no longer work for Smythe and Jones. I figured you knew that."

"No longer work there! They never told me that. They said you were off visiting your sick grandmother and that's why

you couldn't be in on the meetings. Shit, and I fell for it," he grumbled under his breath.

"Who are they?" Syd narrowed her eyes in suspicion, already having a good idea who *they* were. But after placing her heart, not to mention her body, in Trevor's hands, she wanted proof to go on—not just her doubts.

"Your boss, Charles Smythe. And your buddy, Trevor Vanden Bosch." He crossed her arms in front of his chest in defiance.

Well there it was—what she'd been searching for—the dreaded truth. Everything rang clear—Trevor coming to her for a job, his inquisitiveness regarding Stardust Lingerie, and his sudden renewed interest in her. They were all lies. Once again, she'd been stabbed in the back.

Syd felt the color drain from her face and she leaned against the desk for support. She didn't want to believe this could be true—that she'd been fool enough to fall for Trevor's games—again.

But past experience told Sydnie she should have known better.

Trevor had deceived her, used her—just like before.

Trepidation and anger filled her soul. "Well, they lied," she managed to choke out around a lump in her throat. "I left the agency almost two months ago."

"So all the ad layouts, and the decision to use everyday women to model the Venus Bra, weren't your ideas?"

"No, I—"

"They are Sydnie's ideas," a voice said from the doorway. Sydnie turned and saw Trevor standing there, his eyes filled with despondency and remorse.

Alfred whipped around. "You're lying," he thundered.

"She inspired every idea I presented to you, Alfred." Trevor walked deeper into the room, bringing all the lies and deceit full circle.

Sydnie's heart ceased beating in her chest. She'd known all along that Trevor had an underlying motive for coming back into her life. But deep down inside she'd hoped he had changed—that his only motive for being here was because he cared for her—had always cared for her.

And the way he'd made love to her—like she was his everything—that was all a lie, too.

Funny, but life always insisted upon slapping Sydnie in the face, reminding her what happened when she dared to trust in a man and wear her heart on her sleeve.

Tears stung Syd's eyes, but instead of letting them fall, she lifted her chin, bound and determined to show Trevor that his deception meant nothing to her. She'd always been a naive fool when it came to love, and it was best to deal with her failures by shedding her tears in private.

The air in the room thickened and she felt like she'd suffocate if someone didn't say something soon.

"This is bull shit," Mars said, granting Sydnie her wish. "I've always considered myself a reasonable man, so I'm giving you one chance to dig yourself out of your grave, Vanden Bosch. What were you trying to pull?"

"I was trying to do my job."

"Your job?" Sydnie questioned, speaking up for the first time. She faced him head on. She wouldn't be the one to walk away this time. This time she was going to see to it Trevor got his just deserts. "Since when has lying become a job requirement?"

"Come on, Syd. You were at Smythe and Jones long enough to know how their corporate ladder worked."

"Yes, I did. And that's exactly the reason I left." Syd swallowed hard, struggling to keep her hurt and anger in check. "But that's no excuse for you to join them. I'd always hoped you were a bigger man than that, Trevor." She turned away from him and her heart froze over like ice.

"Syd—" He put a hand on her shoulder, but she shoved him away, putting much needed distance between them.

"So what did Smythe offer you this time? A raise? A boat? A condo?" she asked, each word laced with hurt and anger.

Trevor stood rigid, unresponsive to her speculations.

"I hope it was worth the cost," she continued, "like a partnership." Trevor looked away, unable to face her any longer.

His silence confirmed her suspicions.

"How wonderful for you," she said with a steely resolve she didn't feel. Inside she was ready to fall apart.

Mars took a stand beside Sydnie, placing a protective arm around her. "I don't go for ruthless business practices, Vanden Bosch. I'm pulling my account. Tell your boss that truth and see how he likes watching a million dollars fly out the window."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"I can explain, Sydnie," Trevor spoke at last, holding out his hands in apology. "Smythe had me over a barrel—"

"No." She shook her head. "I won't stand here and listen to your excuses."

A flood of emotions raged through Sydnie, but she took a deep breath and forged ahead. She picked up the bouquet of exotic flowers and shoved them into Trevor's arms.

"Syd, if you'd just let me explain." His eyes pleaded with her for understanding, but she didn't care.

"That won't be necessary," she said, the tone of her voice clearly dismissing Trevor from her life.

Forever.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Trevor raised his hand to knock on Sydnie's apartment door, but paused. He mouthed a silent prayer that she'd finally concede and at least let him in long enough to explain.

He'd called time-and-again and was always forced to leave a message, even though he knew she was sitting right there at her desk. He'd even tried e-mail as a last resort.

But nothing worked.

How could he help her understand if she continued to ignore him as though he didn't exist? How could he make her see they'd come too far, sacrificed too much, to just throw it all away as if neither one of them cared?

Well, he couldn't walk away. He'd stand here until Christmas if necessary, but he wasn't leaving until she heard the *whole* truth. He rapped harder on the wooden door and waited. The faint pad of footsteps came from the other side.

"Who is it?" she asked, her voice muffled through the wood.

"Syd. It's Trev. Now hear me out. I really need to talk to you. Give me five minutes and I promise I won't bother you ever again."

Silence hung between them, and he hoped she was at least considering his request and not off scrubbing the bathroom. Seconds ticked into what felt like minutes and still she remained silent. Trevor's chest tightened, truly afraid that no matter what he did, or said, he'd never be able to right the wrongs he'd committed against her.

"Look, Syd," he said with pleading in his voice. "I know I'm the last person you want to see right now, but I *have* to talk to you."

"There's nothing to discuss," she said coldly.

A small wave of relief loosened his aching chest. She'd spoken. At last. Even if those weren't the words he wanted to hear, he'd take them.

"Yes there is. My last paycheck," he joked, hoping to warm the wintry pall hovering over them.

The click of the lock echoed through the hall and the door opened far enough for her to poke her head out. "Here," she growled, and tossed a one-dollar bill at him. The money fluttered to the floor, landing at his feet. She pulled away, intent on slamming the door in his face, but Trevor was too quick for her.

"Please, Syd," he begged as he gripped the heavy oak door. His fingertips touched hers and she jerked her hand away. "I never wanted to hurt you. And I know I deserve your distrust. But throw me a bone, will ya? Five minutes is all I ask."

She frowned, and her eyes studied him as though he were some kind of nasty fungus she wasn't quite sure how to scrub off of her shower door.

All Trevor could do now was hold his breath and wait.

At last, she took a step back and let the door swing wide.

"It's late. Make it quick." She strode across the room in a purple nightshirt and a pair of gray shorts. Grabbing the remote, she clicked off the *I Dream of Jeannie* episode she'd been watching, crossed her arms and waited impatiently.

"Nice apartment," Trevor said, casually. He glanced around the room and noticed the vast array of country-style antiques gave the place a warm, homey feel. Cozy—like he wanted things to be for them.

"Look. You didn't come here to assess my decorating skills, so let's skip the small talk and get to the point."

"Okay," he said with a heavy breath. "When I first started working for Smythe, I didn't give his crooked schemes much thought. I was a newbie in the field, eager to make my way, bring home the big bucks. But the longer I worked for him, and the higher I climbed the ladder, the more I began to realize Smythe used more than a few white lies as tactics to make his scores.

"I grew to hate his methods, his condescension. But most of all ... I hated the way he treated you."

Sydney stiffened and turned toward the large double-hung windows, focusing her gaze on the brick streets and shops of the Old Market area below.

"In spite of his ill treatment of you," Trevor pushed ahead, "you held your head high, matched him move for move, and never gave up. I admire your grit, your tenacity." Braving a few steps, he shortened the distance between them. He reached out to touch her, but stopped his hand in midair before letting it fall back by his side.

"I have to admit," he said. "I owe you a great deal for my success within the agency. You were the one who always came up with the unique ideas, the new approach, but Smythe refused to give credit where credit was due. And what success should have been yours, he gave to me."

Her rigid shoulders slumped and she turned to face him, surprise and disappointment filling her green eyes at the same time. He took another step and she in turn, took one back.

"When Smythe threw the promotion for head ad exec on the table at that staff meeting," he continued, refusing to give up, "I saw the determination on your face, and I knew then that you were setting yourself up for a fall."

He took a huge leap and brushed the back of his fingers along her arm. This time she didn't move. "Syd. I knew you deserved that promotion more than anyone, and I told Smythe so, but no matter what accounts you won, or what I said to try and persuade him, he denied you. Even with all you'd done to land Stardust, our biggest account—"

"I'm a woman," she interrupted. She leveled her gaze on Trevor. "And a woman will never hold any position higher than entry level in Smythe and Jones," she said, quoting Charles Smythe word for word.

Trevor heard the pain in her voice and felt it in his heart. "You knew?"

"That Smythe was a male chauvinist, egotistical and an arrogant bastard, to boot," she said with a bitter laugh. "Of course I knew. I figured out Charles Smythe and his twisted games even before my job interview was over. And when the promotion came up for grabs, I quickly realized he was only pretending to make me feel like I had a shot. Pacifying me, or so he thought. Being the only woman vying for the position, he had to keep me happy so I didn't holler discrimination when I lost out."

"But all those years, Syd. All that B.S.. Why?"

"Simple. Smythe and Jones is one of the biggest ad agencies in the country. I considered myself fortunate to land the job, even if Smythe did base his decision on the size of my bust line. At that point I didn't care. I wanted the job."

"You should've cared."

"I was like you, Trevor—fresh out of college. I wanted the impressive credentials on my resume. I was prepared to do whatever it took to get the job and keep it. Except." She held up her hand, demanding that he let her finish before he said a word. "I vowed to never stoop so low as to sleep with him. No job is worth that price," she said in a deep, curt tone.

"Once Smythe figured out he couldn't woo me into his bed, my career at the agency was over. Oh, sure I worked there for years after that, but I knew that any promotions, raises, or any of the other goodies Smythe offered his employees would never come my way."

"Then why did you stay?"

Sydney stood tall and lifted her chin. "I thought you were the one doing the confessing here. Your five minutes is about up. Get talking."

He raked his fingers through his hair, angry and frustrated by the whole rotten mess. The urge to go back and give Smythe another punch, in the gut this time, hit him full force. "Okay. While you were being denied the rungs of the corporate ladder, I was forced to climb them. I understood that what I'd gotten caught up in was wrong, but it was like a car spinning out of control on ice. I was powerless to stop it."

"You could have quit. Gone to another agency," she stated dryly.

"Sure. I knew that. And I considered it—many times. But the bottom line—I couldn't leave you behind."

She looked away swiftly. "Who made you my protector?"

"I did. Somewhere along the way, through all the meetings, all the brainstorming sessions, I fell in love with you, Syd."

She shook her head in disbelief, her hair swishing about her shoulders. "You had a great way of showing it."

"Syd," he took her hand in his. "I knew that if we made love that night, the next day, after you'd learned of my promotion, you'd feel used and betrayed."

"Kind of like I feel now." She jerked her hand out of his grasp.

"I'm sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing when I turned you away that night."

"What about all the lies this time around?" she bit out. "Was that the right thing? All the down-on-your luck bull you fed me, the flowers and the lingerie ploy. And the ... sex? Was that all it was to you, just sex? Was that *the bonus* Smythe promised you?"

"No," he said firmly. "It wasn't just sex. I made love to you, Syd. There's a difference."

She backed away, not convinced by his words.

Dammit. He had to make her understand. "At first I refused to get involved in Smythe's crazy scheme. Then he offered me a partnership and snowed me with all the perks, the money. But I was still reluctant, and then he started

hinting at termination if I didn't go through with it. I had a lot of sweat and time invested in S & J, too. And in the end, I didn't have the guts to throw it away like you did.

"Then it dawned on me that I had an opportunity to see you again every day, smell the soft scent of your hair and see your sweet smile. I loved you. I couldn't refuse that chance. Syd, I never meant to hurt you. I only wanted to be near you, even if all I got were a few more days. I thought the plan would be simple, get in, get what I needed, and get out."

"Oh, Trevor. Lies breed lies. Didn't you know that?"

Trevor's gut clenched at her reasoning. "I know. And you're right, I soon discovered I was in too deep—that there was no way to keep my boss happy, and not hurt you at the same time. That's why ... I've quit Smythe and Jones."

"What?"

"This morning. After I left you, I handed in my resignation."

"Quit," she said slowly. "And I suppose you think that makes everything all right between us?"

"I'd like to think that it's a start."

"Quitting your job doesn't change the fact you lied to me. Used me. There are certain things in life that can never be rectified, Trevor. No matter what you do."

"I know. I suppose that means you wouldn't consider keeping me on with Studs For Hire?"

"You've got that right." She folded her arms across her chest.

"I figured as much."

"So what are you going to do?"

Surprised by her question, Trevor couldn't help but hope maybe she cared at least a little, after all. "I've been thinking about starting my own ad agency. It'll be tough, but with some time I'm sure I can build a reasonably successful business."

"Plan on stealing away Smythe's clients?" she asked with an edge in her voice.

"I won't steal clients, Syd. I'll work to earn their accounts."

"Starting with Stardust Lingerie?"

"Alfred's account is legitimately up for grabs now that he's fired Smythe and Jones. But as far as he's concerned, I'm still a part of their schemes. He'd never consider me."

"Too bad. Alfred could make you a rich man. But then, I guess that's the price you pay for the games you've played," she said and strode to the door.

"Syd—"

"It's late." She swung the door open. "I've got a busy day ahead of me tomorrow. I have to hire a new carpenter."

The reality of her words stung way to deep for Trevor's comfort and he opened his mouth to protest her sudden dismissal, but quickly thought better of it. He'd dumped a therapy session worth of confessions on her. And after all he'd done, he didn't blame her for kicking him out.

"I'll have Casey cut your paycheck tomorrow and drop it in the mail," she said with finality.

Trevor walked to the door and stopped beside her. "Forget about the money, Syd. Keep it. Consider it as my contribution to the cause." Unable to resist touching her one last time, he

brushed the back of his finger along her cheek. She stood rigid as stone, refusing to look at him, refusing to forgive him.

"Thanks for listening, Syd. No matter what you might think of me, please always remember that I never meant to hurt you. I love you."

He let his hand fall by his side, and without looking back, Trevor strode down the hall and out of her life. And with each and every step he took, his heart twisted and died.

* * * *

Sydney breezed through the doors of Stardust Lingerie and took a deep breath. She crossed her fingers, hoping this little plan worked. Talking to Alfred Mars on Trevor's behalf was the only thing that might help ease the strain between her and Trevor.

After days of wallowing in ice cream and cookies, she still wasn't sure she could forgive Trevor for his deceptions, but on a professional level she did empathize with him. She'd worked for Charles Smythe long enough to realize Trevor wasn't entirely to blame for what he'd done. Smythe was ruthless in his business practices and his employees always ended up paying the price.

Besides, she needed to quit drowning her sorrows in food and do something, or else she'd be forced to buy a new wardrobe.

"May I help you?" a young, pretty brunette said from behind the baroque style receptionist's desk.

"Yes. I'd like to see Alfred Mars please."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No. But I'm sure he'll see me."

"I'm sorry. Mr. Mars is a very busy man. If you make an appointment for a later date—"

"Tell him Sydnie Riley is here," she ordered. The administrative assistant clearly didn't like being told what to do by Sydnie, but she reluctantly buzzed Alfred anyway. Within seconds he was by Syd's side.

"Sydnie. What a surprise," he said with a genuine smile on his face. He wrapped his arms around her and gave a gentle squeeze.

"Thanks for seeing me, Alfred. I appreciate it."

"Anything for my girl. Come on in." He escorted her into his potently masculine office where shelves, filled with trophies and photographs from his wrestling days, lined the walls. He pulled out a leather burgundy chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat. Can I get you anything? Water? Soda? Wine?"

"Nothing, thanks. I don't want to take up too much of your time."

"Nonsense. I always have time for you." He sat in the opposite chair. "Can I take this unexpected visit to mean that you've reconsidered my offer?"

"Alfred." She placed a gentle hand on his. "We both know you weren't serious when you offered me a job." She winked. "Besides, I can't leave Studs for Hire now. I've invested too much."

"Can you blame me for trying?" He squeezed her hand and Syd saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes.

"No." She smiled. "And I appreciate your confidence in me. It means a lot."

"I'd do anything for you, Sydnie."

She cupped his cheek with her hand. "You're the best, Alfred. But you know there can never be anything more than friendship between us."

"Are you sure? I know I look tough on the outside, but I'm really a teddy bear. Don't tell my staff, though."

They shared a laugh and reminisced a few moments before Mars asked "...so do you love Vanden Bosch?"

"Yes I do," she said without hesitation. "Only he doesn't know it yet."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is."

"Well, I'm glad for you. And I hope it all works out. But if it doesn't, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Alfred."

He cleared his throat, thankfully breaking the awkward moment between them. "So. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Actually there is. I'd like to ask you a favor."

"Anything."

"I wouldn't ask this, except I don't think you fully understand what all went on at Smythe and Jones."

Mars stiffened. "I know enough to understand that I was lied to."

"Yes, that's true. But you don't know the whole truth."

"Does it matter? The fact remains that Smythe and Jones didn't shoot straight with me. I don't go for that kind of bull."

"That's just it. *Smythe and Jones* didn't shoot straight."

"Ah. I see where this is going," he said with understanding in his voice. "You don't think Vanden Bosch is to blame."

"Not entirely." Syd took a deep breath and revealed to Alfred how Trevor had gotten caught under Smythe's thumb, and how the mess snowballed into a disaster. Alfred sat and listened, and when she'd finished, he relaxed in his chair.

"You're a special woman, Syd. Even after all Vanden Bosch has put you through, you still rally on his behalf. That is true love," he said with almost a sadness in his voice.

Sydney swallowed hard, recognizing the depth of his feelings for her revealed in his eyes.

"Maybe it's wrong of me to ask this, Alfred, but would you consider giving Trevor another shot with your account?" She held her breath, afraid he'd refuse her request—knowing full well he had every right to refuse.

"I'm afraid you're too late," he said, at last breaking the awkwardness threatening to strangle their meeting. "I've already agreed to give him another chance."

"You have?"

"Yeah." He glanced at the gold Rolex on his wrist. "He'll be here in about fifteen minutes."

Syd shot out of her chair. "Here?! Seriously? He's coming here?"

Alfred stood. "Yes. He called me two days ago and said he was starting his own agency and asked if I'd at least hear him out on some new ideas he had."

"And you agreed?" she asked, disbelief in her voice.

"I'm a fair man, Sydnie, you know that. And I've been around this corporate block a few times myself. It's easy to wind up like a hamster on a wheel if you aren't super careful. It's one of the reasons I retired from wrestling."

"You really are the best, Alfred." She placed a kiss on his cheek.

"Vanden Bosch is one lucky son-of-a-bitch," he sighed.

"Alfred, you have to promise me you won't tell him I was here."

"My lips are sealed, sweetheart."

"Great." She smiled and headed for the door. "Oh, I almost forgot," she said as she turned around. "I'd like to make another appointment with you for next week. I have some business of my own to conduct."

"Really? I knew you couldn't stay away from me." He winked.

"Actually, I'd like to talk business. Have you considered remodeling your offices?" She spread her arms wide, indicating the outer office. "I have ties to the best contracting firm in Omaha." She smiled and together they laughed.

"My girl, Syd. Always the savvy business woman."

* * * *

Sydnie paced her office and glanced at the clock. Trevor should be here at any moment. Her insides fluttered at the thought of his pending arrival, and for the hundredth time, she questioned her sanity in asking him here in the first place.

To occupy her mind, she stole a peek in the bathroom mirror and busied her trembling hands by touching up her lipstick.

It was hell falling in love with a man, then learning to despise him, then falling in love with him all over again. She hated emotional roller coasters, they made life so complicated.

A knock sounded on her office door and her heart caught in her throat. "Syd? It's me, Trev. Are you here?"

Panic set in and the temptation to hide behind the shower curtain until he left, took over.

Where's your grit, Riley? Now's not the best time to grow feathers. "I'm in here," she managed to say. She set down the tube of lipstick and forced her feet to move.

Trevor stood in the middle of her office dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt. The sight of him took her breath away. Was it possible for a man to grow even more handsome in just a few days?

"Hi," she croaked, feeling like that all too familiar shy teenager once again.

"Hi."

"Ah ... thanks for coming. I wasn't sure you would."

"Why'd you think that?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly the queen of hospitality the last time we met."

"You had reason."

"Look, Trevor. I'm going to cut right to the subject before I lose what little nerve I have left. I want to make a confession of my own," she said around a lump in her throat.

He moved closer to where she stood. "Syd—"

"No." She held up her hand. "I have to say this. I used you, too. I'm sorry."

"How?" He shook his head, not understanding.

"The relationship that I wanted with you ... it was a way for me to forget about the unlevel playing field I was on at Smythe and Jones. I used you as my distraction from the pains of being the only woman struggling on a male-dominated team. The flirting, the secret glances, the chase, in a way, were my stress ball. You took my mind off of my professional troubles."

"Syd, you don't have to—"

"Yes. I do." She took a deep breath and rushed on before he could interrupt. "The real trouble was ... I fell in love with you, too, along the way. It was the love that I felt for you that I still feel for you that forced me to leave." She turned away, afraid to see his true feelings for her in his whiskey brown eyes.

"I couldn't work with you every day knowing that you didn't care the same way about me," she continued. "And when you showed up here at Studs for Hire, I sensed something wasn't right. But I saw it as my chance to get even, to make you suffer as I had suffered. I quickly suspected Smythe was behind your reason for showing up at my door, but to make sure, I had to play you at your own game."

"How long have you known?"

"A while."

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

"Guess I'd never make a very good undercover cop," he quipped.

"Trevor." She turned around and faced him. "You aren't the only guilty party here."

"True." He winked, then closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. He brushed the pad of his thumb over her cheek. "But what do you say we forget all about the deception, the guilt, and start over on a *level* playing field this time. We can take our time, see what happens.

"I penciled in a whole hour for us on my calender and we have exactly ... thirty-two minutes left," she said, glancing at her watch. "Let's not waste it." She captured his lips with hers and together they tumbled back on the sofa.

EPILOGUE

"This has been fantastic," Syd said to her business partners. The trio stretched out on the furniture in Casey's office after a long day of celebrating the grand opening of Studs for Hire. They sipped on champagne and dined on a tray of leftover chocolate chip cookies and cheese. "I never imagined we'd have such a turnout."

"I'm hoarse from talking to so many people," Terri said. "And I'm almost out of business cards."

"Me, too," Casey said. "I'll order more on Monday."

Syd leaned her head back on the overstuffed retro-style sofa and let out a deep breath.

"What's with the heavy sigh?" Casey asked.

"That's how I spell relief," Syd joked. "The grand opening is over, it was a huge success, and we've got clients lined up. Perfect. But I'm exhausted."

"Now can we relax a little?" Terri asked. "We've been working like fiends for weeks."

Syd shook her head. "Are you kidding? Relaxation is out of the question. For a while at least. If we get even half of the prospects we talked to during the last two days, we're going to be swamped."

"Maybe we need to hire more help," Casey said. "The five guys we've got so far are never going to be able to keep up."

"Yeah. Isn't it wonderful?" Syd said.

A knock sounded on the door and all three heads turned to see who was invading their quiet space.

"Trevor," Syd said. "What are you doing back so soon? I thought you had errands to run."

"All taken care of." He smiled and Syd's heart swelled with joy and a new round of desire.

Yeah. Everything was perfect.

"I'm sorry to bother your powwow, ladies, but can I borrow Syd for a few minutes?"

"For a price," Terri quipped. "Someone screwed up my desk chair and now I can't keep it in the correct position. It keeps falling to the lowest setting when I sit down. Makes it hard to type with my boobs crushing the keyboard."

"I'll take care of it first thing Monday," Trevor promised. He clasped Sydnie's hand and pulled her up out of her chair. "Come with me, Madam President. I have a surprise for you." He led her into her office and closed the door.

"If you think we're having sex in the closet again, forget it. I'm too tired. And I've still got bruises on my leg. You'll have to settle for a rain check."

"Getting old, are we?" He grinned and pulled a bottle of champagne out of a silver bucket. A bouquet of red roses adorned the coffee table.

"What's all this for?"

"You and I are celebrating."

"And just what are we celebrating?"

"Three things," he said as he poured the golden liquid into two champagne flutes. Tiny bubbles raced to the top of each glass.

"And the first one is?"

He handed her a drink then held his high. "The first toast is for Studs for Hire. May your business thrive and prosper, and make you rich beyond your wildest dreams."

"Here, here." They clinked their glasses together and took a sip.

"The second toast is to me," he continued.

"To you?"

"Yep. You now have the pleasure of dating the president and CEO of Vanden Bosch Advertising. I officially opened my doors today after taking on my first account."

"Trevor that's wonderful!" She threw her arms around him and gave him a hug. The solidness of his chest pressed into her, taking her breath away, making her want more than a hug. Maybe she shouldn't have said no so quickly to more sex in the closet.

"Ask me who my first client is?" he said with all the excitement of a teenager buying his first car. Okay. For once, sex wasn't foremost in Trevor's mind.

"Who's your first client?" she asked, humoring him.

"Come on, Syd. You really don't have to ask."

"But you told me to. Besides, how am I supposed to know?" She shrugged, feigning innocence.

Trevor quirked a brow, confirming he knew better. "It's the one, the only, Stardust Lingerie."

"Oh, Trev. That's fantastic!" Syd jumped into his arms and peppered his cheek with kisses. He smelled so good—like soap and water, and Trevor. Maybe they should give the closet another go.

"Here's to Vanden Bosch Advertising," he toasted. "May my business thrive and prosper, and make me rich beyond my wildest dreams—ethically and legally, of course."

"Of course." Downing another swallow, Trevor refilled their glasses to the top.

"I want to thank you, Syd—for straightening things out with Alfred," he said with all seriousness in his voice. He never would have agreed to meet with me if it hadn't of been for you."

"I figured it was my turn to go to bat for you."

"I appreciate the return in favor. But I struck out on your behalf. Smythe didn't give you the promotion."

"It doesn't matter." She shrugged. "What counts is the fact you stood up for me. Besides, Charles Smythe isn't the man Alfred is."

"True. But Alfred did have one small stipulation before agreeing to give me his account back."

"And that is?"

"That you act as my consultant on all of his ad campaigns. You can be involved as much or as little as you want. Just so you're in on at least the idea and final approval stages."

"I'll do it under one stipulation of my own," she teased.

"More sex?" He smiled and wrapped a long tendril of her hair around his index finger, gently pulling her close.

"Well ... that sounds like a pretty good idea. But I had something else in mind."

"Oh? Do I dare ask what it is?" Sydnie heard the leeriness in his voice.

"It's nothing bad. You simply agree to continue to work for me at Studs for Hire, *at least* on a limited basis."

"I don't know, Syd. I'm a little gun shy. I want it in writing you won't send me out to do anymore work for sexually deprived grandmas."

"Are you kidding? I want you all to myself. I want to remodel my bedroom and you're the only stud I want for the job."

Trevor's warm laughter filled the room, and her heart. "Well, sweetheart, you've got yourself a deal." He captured her lips with his and the minutes passed before they came up for air.

"So what's the third thing we're toasting?"

"Us." He reached behind the champagne bucket and handed Syd a black velvet box decorated with a silver and gold bow.

"What's this?"

"Open it and see."

She set her glass down and noticed her hands were trembling a little. Pulling on the tail of the bow, she let the ribbon fall away. Carefully she opened the lid. A dainty diamond studded key-shaped pendant dangled from a shiny gold chain. "Trevor, it's beautiful."

"I wanted to give you something that proved you can trust me with the company holdings," he quipped. Together they shared more laughter, and Sydnie never felt more alive. "But that's not the only reason. I know it might seem kind of old-fashioned, but it's the key to my heart, Syd. You opened my

Studs for Hire: Woman on Top
by Sherry James

heart, made me see what's really important in life. And I love you for it."

"Oh, Trevor. I think it's wonderfully romantic. Thank you. I'll wear it always." He draped the chain around her neck and fixed the clasp, then turned her back around to face him.

"Did you know that they say if you look into someone's eyes for at least five minutes, you'll fall in love with them?" he said huskily.

"Really?"

"Really. The first five minutes after I met you, I knew I loved you."

"Ditto."

About Sherry James

A native Nebraskan, Sherry James spent her youth riding and writing, and all of those hours spent in the saddle gave her plenty of time to think up a slew of stories. These days she's a wife to an amazing husband, and the mother of two equally amazing kids. She rides when she gets the chance and can't imagine her life without horses. A former rodeo queen, and founding member and past president of the Prairieland Romance Writers, she is also a longtime member of Romance Writers of America. She is a multi published nonfiction writer of magazine and newspaper articles, and has been a winner and finalist in many writing competitions. She has written seven romance novels and she is currently working on the second book in her Studs for Hire series, *Woman in Charge*.

Write to Sherry at

P.O. Box 5162, Grand Island, NE 68802-5162, or visit her web site at www.sherryjames.com

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.