

All's Fair in Love and Advertising



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Chapter One

THE problem with being a creative genius, a veritable advertising legend, Max Tomlin had found, was that everyone was out to get you. The list of people bent on his own personal destruction grew longer by the day: his ex-wife and former business partner, his current business partner and relentless taskmaster, all the pretty boys buzzing around like temptation, and, worst of all, the industry critics who kept predicting his demise with each new campaign, only to be proven utterly wrong by the sheer force of his brilliance.

Today, even the sun was persecuting him, blazing into his bedroom window at the outrageous hour of half past seven, slanting across the bed, hunting him down as he tried to huddle in what was left of the merciful darkness.

At last, he lifted his head. “Marco! Close the damned curtains.”

Marco was his latest dalliance, a would-be actor who’d been born Dwayne or Darryl or something like that before taking a stage name in a fit of optimism. He didn’t particularly resemble a “Marco,” at least not in Max’s opinion. He was slight and fair-haired with huge, fluttery blue eyes and soft creamy skin. When people pointed out that Marco bore an uncanny resemblance to Max’s ex-wife, Christine Hunter, he waved them off impatiently. It was all purely a coincidence, he insisted.

“Marco!” Max called out more desperately. “Curtains!”

Then he remembered. Frederico, his interior designer, had talked him out of curtains. "Heavy folds of fabric," Frederico had scoffed. "How 2008!"

What Max had ended up with instead was more of a sail, a swoop of canvas that canted out from the top of the enormous floor-to-ceiling windows as if his bedroom were a three-masted schooner. A complicated pulley system anchored the sail, a true feat of window treatment engineering, and no doubt it would have been impressive if it hadn't been completely useless at keeping out the light. Frederico was so very fired.

Max reached out sleepily for Marco and got an armful of nothing. He pried one eye open, hardly worth the effort when his reward was a splitting pain in his temple. There was no sign of Marco anywhere, just a note left on the pillow. Max peered at it blearily.

You fall sleep on me agin!!!

Here was reason number one hundred fourteen why this relationship was never going to last: functional illiteracy.

After several false starts, Max managed to crawl out of bed. One of the hallmarks of genius was learning from your mistakes, and he kept his eyes firmly shut to avoid the brutalities of glaring sunlight. He felt his way toward the kitchen, doing his best to avoid the furniture and a stubbed toe.

Last night had been the Advertising Society of America dinner, an annual nuisance, and Max had gone armed with a plan to minimize the tedious waste of his time. He was all set to put in the obligatory appearance, have a drink or two, and then slip out early and spend the rest of the evening at home in more satisfying pursuits, preferably in bed with Marco beneath him.

The plan had been going so well too. He'd shaken some hands, made some jokes, and endured the fawning attention of second-rate creatives who foolishly believed a little transparent ass-kissing was all it took to land a job at Tomlin Foster

Worldwide. He'd finished his Scotch and made a break for the exit when he'd had the bad luck to get waylaid by Christine.

"Off so early?"

He'd turned slowly at the sound of her voice, and honestly, did the woman never age? At thirty-eight, Christine was no less a knockout than she had been in her twenties when they'd first met. Her blond hair was cut short to show off her cheekbones, her dress cut low to show off everything else. Not that Max noticed such things as a recently converted gay man, naturally. Christine had Max's replacement in tow, a blustering windbag with perfect hair and disturbingly white teeth.

"Christine. How lovely to see you." Max's mouth pulled down at the corners, as if his muscles were rebelling against his effort to look cheerfully unconcerned. "And... Phil, is it?"

"Bill," Christine corrected. "Campbell. Which you know perfectly well."

"Tomlin." Bill pumped Max's hand so hard that Max feared a dislocated shoulder. "You've probably heard the news already about the merger."

"Yes, yes, Hunter & Campbell, quite the ring to it."

The first time Max had seen the new nameplate on the building that had formerly been home to Hunter & Tomlin, he'd sincerely considered buying some spray paint and taking up vandalism.

"That's old news, buddy." Bill clapped Max on the back, nearly knocking him off his feet. "This is straight off the presses."

"We're getting married, Max," Christine said, cutting right to the chase.

Max could only stare. "You—" He flicked a glance over at Bill, who was smiling with all the telegenic vacuity of a politician. "*Him.*"

Christine slipped her arm through Bill's and made embarrassing cow eyes at him. "The next time you see me, I'll be Mrs. Bill Campbell." She turned a smile on Max that felt suspiciously like a punch to the gut. "Have a nice night, Tomlin."

She swept away with Bill plastered to her side. Max glanced at the exit and then back over at the bar. It was no contest. The next thing he remembered was stumbling through the door of his apartment many hours—and he was guessing many Scotches—later.

Now he suffered a serious case of the morning after, his stomach lurching, his head pounding. He courageously persevered in his quest to make it to the kitchen. When his feet hit the cool slate tile, he took a shaky breath and braved opening his eyes again only to be greeted by a monstrous perversion. An oversized vase sat on the counter, the colored glass beads that usually filled it replaced by what looked to be every variety of tree nut known to man. Nuts! Marco knew perfectly well that Max was deathly allergic to them. He'd certainly never passed up any opportunity to remind him of that fact.

Another note sat propped up against the vase, scrawled in what looked like strawberry jam.

How's this for decorashun?

"Huh," Max said aloud.

Apparently, he and Marco had broken up.

Oh well, Max told himself. This mismatch of a relationship had already dragged on longer than it probably should have, and if Marco couldn't see what a catch he had in Max, then that was his problem. Max was, after all, a man in his prime, that rarest of all creatures, a successful entrepreneur who still had all his hair. *Dark brown* hair, too, thank you very much, without a hint of gray anywhere. His blue eyes had been called "penetrating" on more than one occasion, and if he didn't get to the gym quite as often as

he meant to, at least he hadn't gone pudgy in his late thirties the way so many of his colleagues had.

Max opened the fridge and took out the coffee tin, carefully checking that there were no nuts in his beans before grinding them. He wouldn't have put it past Marco to go in for a little anaphylactic vengeance. People were always threatening to kill Max. Somebody was actually going to attempt it one of these days.

Happily, though, the coffee was untampered with, and Max made a pot and drank it down, the whole thing, black and scalding. Afterward, he didn't feel exactly human, but at least he had enough strength to make it to the shower. Half an hour later, he was dressed and out the door.

Tomlin Foster Worldwide was a quick ten-block walk from Max's TriBeCa loft. He stopped off at his usual coffee place on the way, because that first pot was only a jumping-off point as far as he was concerned. The girl behind the counter smiled and handed him his cup. "Extra large, no cream or sugar, just the way you like it."

He fished out some cash and took a big, greedy gulp. "You're an angel of mercy."

They went through this same ritual every morning, down to the syllable, and the girl still blushed and giggled when she handed him his change.

Max turned the corner, and the gleaming glass tower that housed Tomlin Foster came into sight. All Max's senses sharpened. Even his hangover retreated a bit. He jogged up the steps and through the doors into the satisfyingly minimalist lobby, all glass and metal and clean lines. His spirits lifted even more.

He nodded to Carl, the security guard, who tipped his cap, and took the elevator up to the top floor. He was actually whistling as he stepped off the car. Work cured pretty much everything, in Max's opinion, even an ex-wife with unfathomable taste in second husbands and an illiterate ingrate of a boyfriend.

Of course, work was more of a salvation when his business partner, Judith Foster, or “The Barracuda,” as he liked to call her behind her back, wasn’t waiting to harangue him before he’d even had his tenth cup of coffee.

She met him at the glass doors that led to the agency’s executive offices. “I thought we agreed you were going to let me deal with the conference room.”

Judith was tall and dark-haired, attractive in a prim, schoolmarm kind of way. When she was unhappy with him, the way she was now, her eyebrows pinched together and her mouth pulled into a flat line. Max half expected her to point her finger and send him to the principal’s office.

“What were you thinking, Max?” Judith demanded.

He shrugged. “Frederico was available, so I had him take a look. He had a vision.”

Judith grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him into the conference room. She was surprisingly strong.

“Hey! Watch it. That’s English tailoring you’re manhandling.”

“Just look at this.” Judith threw up her arms in exasperation. “We have a conference table the size of an ark.”

“Ooh, coromandel ebony.” Max shined the wood with his sleeve.

“We could fit two of every animal on this thing and still have room for your ego.”

“Can you believe this patina? I can actually see my reflection in it.”

“It’s too big!” Judith shouted. “It’s practically touching the walls. You have to suck in your breath to get around it.”

“We’ll just,” Max waved his hand carelessly, “knock down some walls or something.” He admired himself in the table’s shiny surface, smoothing a hand over his hair.

"It's pretentious," Judith said, crossing her arms over her chest, "and it makes us look ridiculous."

Max lifted his chin. "Wrong, and I'll tell you why. This isn't just a table. It's a metaphor. All day, every day, our clients scratch and claw their way through an overcrowded marketplace. They have to live with compressed profit margins and shrinking budgets and spoiled consumers who are always demanding more, more, more. Then they come here to Tomlin Foster," he flung his arms out, "and they finally have some breathing room."

"Uh-huh," Judith said skeptically. She squeezed around the table, making her way to the far side of the room, and shouted, her voice echoing faintly. "How are people even supposed to hear each other?"

"Did I mention the sound system I ordered?" he shouted back.

She glared at him. "And just how much is that going to cost?"

"You can't put a price tag on making a good first impression," he said blithely, before heading off to his office.

He stopped in his tracks when he reached it. Sitting in the cubicle outside his door where his assistant should be—Gretchen, or Gretel, or maybe her name was Heather—was a complete stranger who looked to be all of twelve years old.

"Who are you?" he snapped impatiently.

The kid stood up and just kept unfolding and unfolding and unfolding. At a little over six feet tall, Max was no slouch in the height department, but he had to crane his neck to look this boy in the face. In his very, very *pretty* face. What was their personnel department trying to do to him?

"I'm Troy. It's such an honor to meet you, Mr. Tomlin." The very pretty boy fumbled with Max's hand, squeezing a little too tightly, his palm sweaty. There was a decidedly starry glint in young Troy's eyes.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Max said. “This is wrong. *All wrong.*”

He left Troy standing there looking rather bewildered and went to make an emergency call to their personnel director.

Kate Hoffman picked up on the first ring, as if she'd been expecting him. “Good morning, Max.”

Max ignored her blatant attempt to derail him with common courtesy. “You know perfectly well I insist on female assistants. Why have you sent me a man-child with the looks of an Abercrombie and Fitch model? Are you just *hoping* I'll be able to avoid temptation? Because a gay man like myself is not made of stone.”

“How long have you been gay now? Eight months, is it? Since about the time your ex-wife took up with her new business partner, if I remember correctly.”

“Not the point!” Max huffed. “I need an assistant, not eye candy. Are you trying to give me a lawsuit? Or a bad case of blue balls? Or both? Just send back what's her name.”

“Greta,” Kate supplied. “And she quit, remember?”

“Greta. Right. I knew it was something like that. And just when did this quitting occur?”

“On Friday? The same day she started? There were tears? Ring any bells?”

“What about that other girl? What's-her-face. The one with the French name.”

“Martine,” Kate said in her deliberately patient voice. “She's out on disability for stress-related illnesses, which I've told you before. *Illnesses*, Max. As in more than one. When she comes back, I'm not reassigning her to you, so don't even ask me. I might as well hold a gun to the poor woman's head.”

“Well, you can't stick me with Troy the centerfold,” Max said sullenly.

“Just keep your hands to yourself, and it will all work out just fine.”

“Kate, I don’t think you understand what it’s like to be a gay man who’s just discovered his—”

“Max, you don’t understand what it’s like to be the personnel director who has to keep you in assistants.” Apparently, Kate’s store of patience had been exhausted, because she was kind of shouting. “This is it. Make it work with Troy or go without. I’m tired of sending perfectly good administrative help up there only to have you run them off before they can even finish the day. I’ve spoken to Judith about it, and she’s backing me up all the way.”

Kate hung up with a determined click before Max could get out so much as “But—”

He replaced the phone thoughtfully. Kate was giving him ultimatums now, was she? They’d just see about that. He got up from his desk and went out to speak with Troy.

“I’m sorry.” He did his best to sound as if he meant it. “We’re facing some budget cuts, and I’m afraid we’ve had to eliminate your position.”

Troy blinked at him. “But Ms. Hoffman didn’t mention anything about—”

“It just happened, I’m sorry to say.” Max shook his head sadly.

“Oh. So, I guess—”

“Yes, yes, time to be on your way.” Max tugged at Troy’s elbow, urging him to his feet. “Here’s a little something in the way of severance.” He pulled out his wallet and shoved all the cash he had on him into Troy’s hand.

Troy stared at the money bug-eyed. “Wow. Thanks, Mr. Tomlin. That’s really cool of you. I mean, I’ve only worked here the half hour and all.”

“My pleasure.” Max hustled him down the hall to the elevator and pushed the button at least ten times before the doors finally dinged open. “Don’t be a stranger.” He shoved Troy inside.

“If you ever get the budget straightened out and need—” The doors closed, cutting off the rest of the sentence.

Max breathed out a sigh of relief. Lawsuit averted. He headed to the kitchen to fetch his own coffee. How complicated could it possibly be to hire a new assistant? So Kate wouldn’t help him. He was perfectly capable of doing it himself. He just needed to advertise somewhere. He snapped his fingers. Craigslist, of course.

He went back to his office and hunkered down in front of his computer. “So, you think you can keep up with a genius?” he started typing and went from there. After some edits—because he was a perfectionist naturally—he spent a few minutes signing up for a craigslist account, and voilà! He was well on his way to being properly staffed once more. Who needed Kate Hoffman anyway? *He* certainly didn’t.

He was smiling smugly when Judith swooped into his office, closing the door behind her, which meant she’d come to discuss “important business” for the second time that day already, and it wasn’t even.... Max checked his watch. Ten o’clock. How fair was that?

Judith leaned against the credenza. She never sat down for these little discussions of theirs, a blatant power play if Max had ever seen one.

“Why do you look so sneaky?” Judith narrowed her eyes at him. “What have you been up to?”

Max surreptitiously closed his browser. “Nothing. I have no idea what you mean.”

For a moment, she looked as if she might argue the point, but then she apparently decided she had better things to do with her time. “We’ve been invited to pitch for a new account.”

Max perked up at the news. He loved nothing more than the thrill of the chase. "Tell me everything."

Judith smiled. "I thought that would get your attention." She handed over a file. "The company is called Avionics, small but up-and-coming. They pioneered technology that helps prevent midair collisions, and they're looking to raise their profile with a corporate image campaign. It's a chance for us to beef up our technology portfolio."

"Sounds interesting."

Max started to flip through the materials in the file: brochures, news clippings, a printout of the Avionics web site.

"Joe Bennett is the CEO. I spoke with him on the phone at some length. He's very interested in getting a feel for the people he'd be working with if our agency is selected. I get the impression he's the old-fashioned sort who likes to do business with a handshake. Anyway, he specifically asked to meet you. So I had Sharon make a reservation at La Galou for the two of you at eight o'clock tonight."

"Wait. Wait just a minute." He frowned at the page he was reading. "It says here that this Bennett is ex-Air Force."

Judith raised an eyebrow. "So?"

"And the company's main headquarters is in Montana!"

"I repeat: So?"

Max stared at her. "Are you simple-minded? I'm not having dinner with some paramilitary yokel. Do you have any idea what they do to gay men out there in the middle of nowhere?"

"I highly doubt Joe Bennett is going to gay bash you in the middle of La Galou," Judith said dryly.

"But—"

"But nothing." She got the steely look in her eyes that Max had rightfully learned to fear. "You *will* have dinner with him, and

you *won't* screw it up.” She took a step toward the door and then smiled back at him sweetly. “We have a conference table to pay for, after all.”

She strode off just as Lisa Sanderson, head of Account Services, or “The Snake,” as Max preferred to call her, came slithering in.

“Oh, now what?” he demanded.

“Good morning to you, too, Tomlin. I’m just dandy, thanks. How are you?” She sauntered over to his desk, her blond ponytail bouncing with every step. She’d been a cheerleader in high school—a fact she was quick to tell anyone who would listen—and she reminded Max of all the girls who hadn’t given him the time of day back when he was a teenage word geek.

He glared at her. “What do you want?”

She plopped down onto the edge of his desk, although he’d told her time and again not to get her posterior all over his workspace. “I came to remind you we have the casting for Little Miss Wisconsin Dairy this afternoon.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that,” Max snapped, although really he hadn’t given it much thought one way or the other. The Wisconsin Dairy account was hardly his favorite. “Isabel and Jason will be there. They can handle it.”

They were his top creative team. They knew what to do. He had more important things to focus on than cheese. Besides, he really wasn’t any good with kids. Just ask his sister Jennifer and his eight-year-old niece Chelsea.

“The client is paying for the great Max Tomlin,” Sanderson persisted. “They specifically asked if you’d be there.”

He crossed his arms over his chest stubbornly. “And you told them no, naturally.”

Sanderson broke into a big, infuriating smile. “I said, ‘Of course! Where else would our worldwide creative director be but

right there, giving this very important business his own personal touch?”

“I can’t possibly—”

“I talked to Judith. She agreed it would be good for client relations.”

Apparently, at the top of Judith’s agenda for the day was ganging up on him with every last person at the agency. She’d inherit the whole thing if Max prematurely shuffled off this mortal coil. Sometimes, he thought she was *trying* to give him a stroke.

“Maybe I can make it to callbacks,” he hedged, planning to be very, very busy that day.

Sanderson rolled her eyes. “These are the callbacks, Tomlin. Glad to know you’re on top of things. I’ll see you at the casting office at two.” She headed for the door.

“I hate you. You know that, right?” he called after her.

She laughed. “You’re creative. I’m accounts. If you didn’t hate me, it would be a sure sign of the apocalypse.”

Chapter Two

AFTER all this aggravation, Max's headache returned full force, and his day just kept spiraling downward. He had an internal review with one of his teams on the Caribbean tourism account, and the work was just painfully wrong. *We're putting the "happy" in "happy camper."* Apparently, writing headlines wasn't something they bothered teaching at advertising school anymore.

In between meetings, he tried to call Marco, because maybe Max wasn't quite so ready to be boyfriendless when his ex-wife was getting married to a walking advertisement for cosmetic surgery. He kept getting voice mail, the same annoying message Marco had had since Max had known him: "You dropped the dime, now say your line." Wannabe actor wit was decidedly unfunny. Finally, Max blocked his own number out of desperation, and Marco picked up at last.

"Hey, baby," he said in his faux-Italian accent.

"Marco, listen—"

"Hold on just a minute." The next thing Max knew, he'd been put through to voice mail again.

He stared at his phone. Who exactly had Marco been calling "baby"? The fact that Max felt more put out than jealous said everything about their relationship—or the lack thereof.

This state of resigned acceptance lasted until he accidentally picked up a call from his ex-wife, something that never would have happened if he'd had an assistant screening out nuisances and deep psychic traumas. For a moment, he almost regretted giving Troy his walking papers. Then he imagined himself splayed across

the front page of the *Post* with the screaming headline *Ad Perv Gets 'Creative' With Male Secretary*. He consoled himself with the notion that talking to Christine was the lesser of two evils.

"So I hear we're going up against each other for the Avionics business." Her voice pulsed in his ear, low and throaty and so very familiar.

"Are we? Good. That'll make it all the more satisfying when we win." He did his best to sound breezy and smug, but there was a lump in his throat he had to swallow around. He refused to call it regret or loss or anything quite so pedestrian and pathetic.

"Keep telling yourself that," Christine said, laughing. She had always loved a challenge, except for when she suddenly didn't anymore and announced that twelve years of marriage to Max was more than enough, thank you very much.

"Oh, please," Max scoffed, trying to push all wistful thoughts aside. "What's your secret weapon? Mr. Made of Plastic?"

"Jealous, Max? It's been two years," she said almost gently, which was far worse than sarcasm, worse than anything, really. "You need to move on."

"Yes, well," Max said in his most condescending manner, the tone of voice that made people want to punch him and sometimes even take a swing. "You need to accept that I'm a gay man, and your lack of a penis was always going to come between us."

"Interesting how you conveniently discovered your homosexual side after I left you." She had the temerity to sound amused.

"Keep telling yourself *that*, princess." He quickly hung up. He always had liked having the last word.

He sat there for a moment, breathing as raggedly as if he'd just run ten blocks. Then he scrambled for his phone and started frantically texting Marco. Not surprisingly, there was no reply, not

even an illiterate kiss off, not even a “fuk u.” He supposed Marco had already taken care of that with the pecans and Brazil nuts.

By the time Max got to the Little Miss Wisconsin Dairy audition, his headache had turned into a jackhammer pounding away in his brain. There was a hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach, as if his life was just empty, empty, never going to be anything but empty. Since this was ridiculously maudlin, he chose to ignore it. The casting agency was located in a low-rent, nondescript building near Times Square, not Max's usual choice, but the Wisconsin Dairy people had no appreciation for the niceties in life. They preferred to save a few bucks and look for their new corporate mascot among painted cinderblock walls and metal folding chairs rather than in a well-appointed office.

Max went up in the elevator and found his team, Jason Driscoll and Isabel Almeda, hanging around by the front desk.

“Don't even try to tell me I'm late,” he snapped.

“Not at all,” Isabel said, completely unruffled by Max's tone. “Lisa has taken the clients out to lunch. They have not yet returned.”

As usual, Isabel looked as if she'd just come from a yoga retreat. She wore her long dark hair pulled back in a neat knot at the nape of her neck. Her clothes were simple, all black and impeccably cut. She projected an air of such utter tranquility that Max would have suspected anyone else of being medicated up to their eyeballs, but the rowdiest Isabel ever got was a second cup of herbal tea. For about the thousandth time since he'd met her, Max had to wonder what she was doing in advertising. The industry belonged to the manic and the thoroughly neurotic; Max was the perfect case in point. And yet, despite having entirely the wrong disposition for the business, Isabel managed to be one of the most talented art directors he'd ever worked with.

“I hope we're all clear on exactly what it is we're looking for.” Max raised an eyebrow at the two of them.

“Yeah,” Jason grunted at him.

If Max had only their conversations to go by, he would have put the number of words in Jason’s vocabulary at about a baker’s dozen. The man had to be the world’s most laconic copywriter—and quite possibly the tallest. He towered over Max like a redwood forest of one. His long hair, which stuck out wildly in all directions, made him seem that much more enormous.

“Is the talent here yet?” Max asked.

Isabel nodded. “They have been arriving for the past half hour. The producer has had them fill out the necessary paperwork. We are only waiting for the clients.”

Max shook his head. “Time is money. Let’s get started. As many times as Sanderson has bitched about me being late, she should know better.”

Isabel and Jason exchanged hesitant glances, not at all subtly.

Max glared at them. “Do I need to remind you that I’m still your boss?”

“Nope,” Jason said in a deadpan, “but you always do anyway.”

The room assigned for their auditions was just as Max had imagined, devoid of all creature comforts. He shifted restlessly on his metal folding chair, grumbling about what the lack of proper ergonomics was doing to his back. The talent would be filmed against a blank wall, which was painted an uninspiring shade of chartreuse. The only thing that looked as if it had been done by professionals was the lighting.

“Let me see the song,” Max said, snatching Isabel’s copy out of her hands. He gave it a quick once-over, wrinkling his nose. “Were you on crack when you wrote these lyrics?” he demanded of Jason. “I really didn’t remember it being this bad.”

Jason scowled at him.

Isabel quickly spoke up. "The client has had significant input to the revisions since you last saw it, Max."

Translation: they rewrote it themselves. Of course, the account team would let them get away with that. Anything to keep the client happy.

"The CEO's daughter is a budding songwriter, I believe," Isabel volunteered.

"Well, that would explain why our spot sucks so much now," Max said grimly.

Adam, the producer, came into the room, clipboard in hand, and gave Max a questioning look. Max waved his hand unenthusiastically with the go-ahead. The sooner they started, the sooner he could go back to his office, where the furniture didn't fold up.

They went through the first few prospects, all blonde and dimpled with ringlets or braids and big, cloying smiles. There were few things more absolutely harrowing in the world than child actors. Max quickly dismissed one after the next. Some couldn't sing and others couldn't dance, and at least one seemed destined to grow up to be a modern-day Baby Jane. Little Miss Wisconsin Dairy wasn't supposed to be terrifying.

"This is such an enormous waste of my time." Max heaved a sigh after yet another no-talent Tiffany or Ashley or whatever her name was left the room.

"Perhaps we would be more successful if we gave the girls more direction," Isabel suggested gently.

Max snapped his fingers. "Yes! Exactly. Good point. We need to mold these little brats."

He got to his feet as the next candidate came through the door.

"I did not mean—" Isabel said hastily. "Perhaps Jason would be better suited—"

Max waved her off. "I've been directing talent since you were in diapers. I think I can handle it."

"If you say so," Isabel said uncertainly.

"This should be good," Jason said under his breath, though not so quietly that Max couldn't hear him.

Max glowered. Jason just shrugged, clearly not the least bit intimidated. This was the problem with employing giants, Max thought. They didn't scare easily.

"Mr. Tomlin, this is Veronica," Adam introduced him to the next beaming, pint-sized diva. "And her mother, Margaret."

"*The* Max Tomlin?" the mother fluttered. "Oh, we're so honored."

"Yes, yes, naturally you would be."

The woman put her hands on her daughter's shoulders and told him proudly, "My Ronnie is a very talented girl. She'll give you whatever you need, however you need it."

Max could only hope she didn't mean to sound quite so much like she was pimping out her kid. He cleared his throat. "Yes. Well. Shall we?"

Adam gave the girl directions, the music started, and the cameraman started rolling. Ronnie put on a big, bright, beauty-pageant smile and launched into a dance routine that was all swiveling hips and jazz hands.

"No, no, no," Max interrupted after a few bars. "This is a commercial for *milk*, not a summer stock production of *42nd Street*. Try to look like an actual child."

In a flash, Ronnie's expression transformed, becoming wide-eyed and wholesome. She simpered preciously for the camera as she soft-shoed in true Shirley Temple fashion.

"More energy," Max called out.

Ronnie flung herself into the routine, sashaying for all she was worth, pirouetting with such manic glee that Max could imagine it as a scene from some straight-to-video horror movie about a precocious child star in a talent competition who lurked around backstage offing the competition in increasingly gruesome ways.

“*Energy*,” Max emphasized, “not insanity. Try to seem friendly.”

The girl’s answer to this was to bat her eyelashes at the camera like the most inveterate flirt. Max seriously had to wonder what her mother was teaching her.

“Fine, fine,” he said with a sigh. “Let’s do the song.”

“Do you still have the sheet music we gave you, or do you need another copy?” Adam asked the girl.

She lifted her chin. “I already memorized everything.” Her expression was insufferably smug. Max couldn’t help being a little impressed despite himself.

Veronica folded her hands beneath her chin and broke into song. The lyrics were even more painful when actually voiced aloud.

“We need a disclaimer on this commercial so no one thinks we’re responsible for this drivel,” Max editorialized.

Isabel put her finger to her lips, actually shushing him. Jason looked amused. The girl kept on singing.

“Maybe it would be better in a different key,” Max speculated.

The girl started over, slightly higher.

Max shook his head. “Not that one.”

She tried a minor key.

“Nope.”

She went lower.

“Uh uh. Still not there.”

“Max!” Isabel admonished. “She is not a toy. You can not keep changing directions as if she were a remote control car.”

“Gonna make her cry,” Jason predicted.

As if on cue, the girl scrunched up her face and stuck out her bottom lip, which began to quiver theatrically. She took in a big, audible gulp of air and wailed, “Mama!” And the waterworks went off.

“You monster!” the mother shouted, draping her arms protectively around her daughter’s shoulders.

From there, it was a short trip to all-out chaos. Adam knocked over a chair in his rush to intercede, his producer’s instinct to smooth things over in high gear. He offered coffee, Perrier, and a child-sized dose of Xanax in such a flurry that the words all blurred together. The mother continued to try to calm the girl, and Isabel hurried over with a box of Kleenex and some soothing words. Jason hovered, enormous and silent, not helping matters in the least.

Max babbled away, trying to defend himself. “I only wanted to get the best performance out of her. You saw that, right?”

At this, the girl began to wail louder, a bone-rattling sound with the resonance of a sonic boom. She had a set of lungs on her, Max had to give her that. Just as the caterwauling reached its most ear-splitting, in walked Sanderson and the clients.

“What is going on here?” Sanderson demanded, the tips of her ears turning bright red.

Under other circumstances, Max would have found this highly entertaining. He lived to piss Sanderson off.

But now he had a mother pointing her finger at him and declaring, “That horrible man made my baby cry.”

Every gaze in the room turned on Max. Matching expressions of horror formed on the clients' faces. Sanderson's eyes glinted dangerously, as if she were mentally cataloguing how she could kill Max and get away it.

"I'm sure it's all just a misunderstanding," Sanderson declared in her calmest voice, for the benefit of the clients.

Max jumped all over this. "Exactly! The kid's just," he waved his hand while he scrambled around for something plausible, "afraid of Jason. She probably thinks he's going to eat her. Who doesn't, really?"

Jason rolled his eyes. Sanderson glared daggers. The clients exchanged a look that Max interpreted to mean: Is everyone in advertising completely insane?

"Didn't you have something really important you needed to take care of back at the office?" Sanderson said to Max, her jaw clenched so tightly the words had to fight their way out.

"Yes, Max," Isabel, the traitor, hurried to agree. "We can handle things here."

Little Veronica buried her face against her mother's shoulder. The client, Marvella or Mavis or something like that, went over and began to pat her awkwardly on the back. "There, there, dear. Everything's going to be just fine. I'm sure your performance was just delightful, and when you've gotten over your bad experience, we'd love to have you sing and dance for us." She directed an accusatory look at Max.

"Take all the time you need," Adam chimed in. "You can come back tomorrow, even, if you'd rather. We can absolutely set that up."

Max opened his mouth to point out what a ridiculous waste of money it would be to schedule another day at the casting agency, and weren't they supposed to be on a budget? But Sanderson made a rather threatening gesture for him to shut up.

“Come now, little miss,” the other client said in grandfatherly fashion. “Dry your eyes and show us what a little trouper you are.”

“We were most impressed with your talent, Veronica,” Isabel said. “I do hope you will be able to share your performance with Ms. Tyler and Mr. Fielding.”

Max pushed the door open and glanced back a final time at the rather nauseating spectacle of six adults pandering to the histrionics of one tiny prima donna. The girl lifted her head from her mother’s shoulder as if she could sense Max watching her. Just for a second, she flashed the smuggest smile Max had ever seen outside of the mirror, a smile that said, “If you don’t think I’m getting this part now, you’re a bigger idiot than I thought.” Then she promptly lowered her head again and let out a brave, wracking sob.

Huh, Max thought. Maybe she was a better actress than he’d given her credit for.

Chapter Three

MAX was not in the best of moods by the time he arrived at La Galou. He grumbled at the coat check girl not to rumple his cashmere and trudged over to the maître d', who smiled politely. "May I help you, Mr. Tomlin?"

"Yes, yes," Max said unhappily. "I'm meeting someone. Our reservation is at eight. If he's not here, I can—" He looked longingly over at the bar. He could really use a Scotch or four about now.

The maître d' thwarted that plan. "Mr. Bennett has already arrived. Allow me to show you to your table."

Max heaved a sigh and followed him through the maze of pristine white tablecloths. Only one man sat alone. He was dressed conservatively in a blue suit, white shirt, and red tie, the uniform of every unimaginative businessman on the planet. In sharp contrast, his unruly mop of blond hair had a decided surf-bum aesthetic to it.

Bennett rose to his feet as Max approached, all liquid grace and easy smile, holding out his hand. "You must be Max Tomlin." His western drawl gave Max's name several extra vowels. "Joe Bennett."

Now that Max had a better look at Bennett's long, lean frame, he could see that this was the kind of body that did not come from the treadmill or the rowing machine. Good God, the man was probably *outdoorsy*. Max was so not equipped to deal with someone who found it entertaining to scale the side of a mountain or shoot down a snowy slope with nothing between him and

mortality but a couple of strips of plywood. Truly, only someone entirely demented could have thought this dinner was a good idea. If Tomlin Foster ended up uninvited to the pitch, Judith would have no one to blame but herself.

“Sorry if I’ve kept you waiting,” Max said as they shook hands. “I hope it won’t make you late for your NRA meeting or whatever you’ve got scheduled afterward.”

Bennett just laughed and clapped Max on the back. Either he was very laid back or too stupid to realize when he was being insulted. “I won’t even miss the part where we talk about how guns don’t kill people, people kill people. Have a seat. I just got here myself.”

A waiter brought menus and asked if they’d like to see the wine list.

Max looked to Bennett. “I believe people in your part of the country frown on the demon alcohol?”

“Maybe some do,” Bennett said cheerfully, “but I won’t have a problem unless we get a bad vintage.” He took the wine list from the waiter.

Max perused his menu, and when he glanced up again, he found Bennett perusing him. He wasn’t at all subtle about it, his gaze traveling languidly over Max’s body. He didn’t have the good grace to look away when Max caught him at it, either. He just flashed a winning smile.

“I’m a big fan of your work.” Bennett’s voice was low and appreciative, and he leaned in, his attention utterly focused, as if Max were the only person in the world.

It struck Max as a practiced move. Business was a form of flirtation, after all, and Bennett was a good-looking guy. Oh, all right, *fine*. He was drop-dead gorgeous, in a vaguely Marlboro Man kind of way, with his chiseled jaw and wide green eyes and the

slightly scruffy five o'clock shadow thing he had going on. But Max was not about to be taken in by any cowboy charm.

"Oh, really," he said coolly. "You know my work? Which one of my spots is your favorite?" His lips twisted into a challenging little smirk. "Just curious."

Bennett scrunched up his forehead as he pondered the question, and the moments ticked by. Max had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. Anyone who knew anything about advertising at all would have been able to come up with Max's most recent beer campaign, at the very least. He *had* won a Clio for it.

At last, Bennett rejoined the conversation. "You know, I liked the gum thing. That was catchy. And the beer stuff. Everyone likes that. But I think my favorites are the commercials you did for that financial services company, the serious ones with the black-and-white footage and the literary quotes. Gotta admire someone who can work e.e. cummings into a commercial about asset protection."

Max blinked. That campaign dated from at least ten years ago. It wasn't one he was generally remembered for, but it happened to be his own personal favorite. He lifted his chin stubbornly. Just because Bennett appreciated his work didn't make him any less of a yokel; it just made him a yokel with good taste. Any moment now, Max knew, the charm would rub off, and Bennett would show his true, narrow-minded colors.

Max did his best to hurry along the process. "I read your company is headquartered in Montana."

"We have a small office here in New York. But, yeah, most of the operation is back in Wilcox," Bennett said. "A small town, but we like it. Great views of the mountains. And we're one of the biggest employers in the state. So that has its perks."

"Is that what drew you there? Tax breaks?" Max lifted an eyebrow inquiringly. "Or was it the handy proximity to the local militias?"

Bennett laughed again, but it didn't have quite the same humor as before. "Naw, no playing at war out in the woods for me. Wilcox is where I grew up. After I retired from the Air Force—" His voice got tighter. "Medical retirement. My jet got shot down in Bosnia. It just made sense to come home. Be near family while I was laid up. I ended up staying put."

"Oh," Max said weakly. "I didn't realize—"

Bennett shrugged. "Hey, all in the past now, right?"

Happily, the sommelier chose that moment to descend upon them. Bennett turned his attention back to the wine list, and Max fidgeted in his seat. There was an uncomfortable feeling in his chest, something he wasn't used to, something that left him off-kilter. Possibly it was a sense of shame. That would explain why he didn't recognize it right off the bat.

"Are there any questions about the wine list I can answer for you?" the sommelier asked, the words softly accented.

"Red or white?" Bennett asked Max.

He shook his head. "Whatever makes you happy."

Bennett glanced up at the sommelier. "J'avais pensé à un Bordeaux. Recommanderiez-vous le Château Margaux 2004 ou La Mission Haut Brion 2002?"

Max couldn't keep himself from staring.

The sommelier answered quickly enough, so apparently Bennett was as fluent in French as he sounded to Max's monolingual ear. "Ce sont tous les deux d'excellents vins mais je donnerais l'avantage au La Mission Haut Brion 2002."

"Une bouteille de Haut Brion, alors."

"Très bien." The sommelier went off to fetch their wine.

"I hope you like it," Bennett said.

"You speak French."

“Can’t put anything past a genius.” Bennett grinned, but not meanly, not the way Max would have. “I lived in Paris for a year between college and grad school. Learned a lot more that way than all those years I wasted in class.”

Max found himself staring again. “Grad school?”

“Aeronautical engineering.” Bennett’s mouth turned up at the corners. “Didn’t think a redneck like me had it in him to get an advanced degree, huh?”

Heat flooded Max’s face, because of course that was exactly what he’d thought. “No, no, of course not,” he denied anyway. “I just—” He trailed off feebly.

Bennett laughed, the sound deep and rich, as if he was genuinely amused. “You New Yorkers. You never stop being funny.”

His eyes sparkled brightly. They weren’t precisely green now that Max was really paying attention, but a very pretty hazel. Discovering Bennett wasn’t the backwards hillbilly Max had presumed was like having a veil torn away. Max couldn’t stop noticing things about him. Bennett reached for his water glass, and the way his hand wrapped around it made Max shiver, as if those long, elegant fingers were touching *him*. Bennett lifted the glass and took a sip, and Max stared at Bennett’s lips, full and pink and soft-looking. The muscles in Bennett’s throat worked as he swallowed, and suddenly Max’s mouth felt really quite dry.

“I, uh—it’s possible I may owe you—” The word *apology* stuck in his throat from infrequent use. “I may have been kind of a jerk before.”

Bennett smiled good-naturedly, his eyes crinkling attractively at the corners. “You know, you’re not the first person in the big city to assume I’m a hick. And Judith did mention you were colorful.”

“Really?” Max said dryly. “Usually she just calls me ‘abrasive’. Look, let’s start over, okay?” He held out his hand. “I’m Max Tomlin. Tell me about your company and what you need your advertising to do.”

Bennett shook his hand, his strong grip sending a thrill down Max’s spine. “Joe Bennett. So, here’s what you need to know, Max. My company is my life’s work, and now some soulless corporation has set its sights on it. I need some damned brilliant advertising to raise our profile and our stock price and get the vultures off my back.”

Max leaned forward eagerly. “I want every detail. Don’t leave anything out.”

The waiter came to take their order, and then Bennett launched into his story. “I’ve had flying in my blood since I was a kid. My dad used to take me out to this little local airstrip to watch the planes take off. The only thing I ever wanted was to be a pilot. After I got hurt, I wasn’t deployable anymore, and I had to figure out something else to do with myself. Then I read an article in *Aviation Today* about seven near midair collisions in one month right here in the New York City area. I had my inspiration. Started my company the very next day with what I had in the bank and cash advances on my credit cards. After a few years of designing and testing and perfecting, we were ready to take our anti-collision technology to market.”

Max nodded. “Yes, yes, I read it’s already standard on commercial airliners, and many private planes have started carrying it as well. The company did so well you took it public three years ago.”

The waiter cleared away their salad plates, and their entrees followed.

“Yup,” Bennett said, “and it’s that success that’s caused all the trouble. Brought us to the attention of Omnion. You know what they’re like.”

Max made a wry face. "The corporation that owns everything."

"They started sniffing around, requesting meetings, talking merger. I turned them down flat. No way can they run my company better than I can. They don't care about aviation. They just want to beef up their technology holdings. But they're not so easily put off. They've been trying to mount a hostile takeover. If I can't raise Avionics' stock price, I can kiss my company goodbye." He leaned forward, his expression fierce. "Can you understand what it's like to be on the verge of losing everything you've worked for?"

Memories flashed through Max's head: the moment of weakness when he'd signed away his share of Hunter & Tomlin in the pathetic hope that maybe he could win Christine back by giving her what she wanted; the pounding of the judge's gavel in divorce court when he finally understood he wasn't going to get to keep his wife *or* his agency; the first time he'd walked past his old office building and saw Mr. Plastic's name where his belonged.

"Let's just say I have an idea how that feels." Max set his jaw. "And you're not going to lose a damned thing. We're going to come up with advertising so fucking moving it makes people dig the loose change out of their sofas to invest in you. No one's going to take your company away. I'm not going to let that happen."

Bennett gazed steadily at Max, taking his measure. "You know what? I think I believe you."

Max could feel his cheeks go hot, too pleased for his own good. He cleared his throat. "Yes. Well. You should believe me. I'm Max Tomlin."

Bennett smiled in amusement. "Definitely colorful."

They finished off their meal with some coffee. Max picked up the check, holding up a hand to forestall any protests. "Trust me, if I were trying to bribe you I would have done something far more extravagant than buying you dinner."

This made Bennett smile, which gave Max a little flutter in the pit of his stomach. It was so utterly ridiculous he didn't know what to make of himself. Bennett wasn't even his type. They picked up their coats at the checkroom and spilled out into the clear chill of New York in October, pausing in the soft pool of light from the restaurant's front window.

"I'm this way." Bennett jerked his head toward the uptown corner.

"Oh," Max said, unaccountably disappointed that they were going in opposite directions. "I guess I'll just—" He scanned the traffic somewhat halfheartedly for a taxi.

Bennett lingered, as if not quite ready to say his goodbyes, and Max stalled there as well, making no move toward the curb. A soft slant of light from a nearby streetlamp fell across Bennett, accentuating the angles and planes of his handsome face, throwing his obscenely pretty mouth into high relief. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but it looked wet, as if Bennett had just licked his lips.

They were standing close enough that Max could catch the sweet scent of wool from Bennett's coat, a sharp, clean whiff of soap, and something else, something warm and male. He realized with a dizzy little rush that this was the scent of skin. All Max's boyfriends had smelled like flowery shampoo or too much body spray. If Max closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was back with Christine. Joe Bennett, on the other hand, radiated masculinity, and Max had his eyes wide open, even as he leaned in, closing the short distance between them, and fumbled a kiss onto those cupid's-bow lips, which were just as soft as they'd looked.

He brain caught up with him a second later, which was quite possibly a second too late, and he jerked back as if he'd been scalded. Judith was going to kill him for screwing this up, unless

of course Bennett went into a homosexual panic first and beat her to it.

"I wasn't expecting that," Bennett said.

His voice sounded perfectly calm, and he stood there, giving Max a speculative look. Max had no way of knowing if this was a good sign or if Bennett was mentally searching the homophobe's handbook for the appropriate retribution.

Bennett moved closer, and Max managed not to flinch, although it was a close thing.

"People don't usually guess I'm bisexual," Bennett said, his voice so low and husky Max felt as much as heard it. "My place is just a few blocks away. You want to come for a drink?"

"Uh—" Max's heart beat hard enough that it was distracting. Was this just a drink? Or could Bennett possibly mean.... "Sure. Yes. Of course. I wouldn't say no to a Scotch."

Bennett's smile was quick and pleased. "Great."

They headed north. At the corner, Bennett rested his hand at the small of Max's back to guide him across the street. It sent shivers up Max's spine as surely as if Bennett had been touching skin. They walked another block, and then Bennett steered Max onto a side street with a hand on his arm. Coming in the opposite direction were two men together. As they got closer, it became clear they were a couple, a graying older man holding the hand of a younger man who looked a bit of a twink, not unlike the guys Max had dated since his divorce. They passed each other on the narrow sidewalk. Bennett smiled slightly.

"What?" Max asked.

With a pang, he wondered if Bennett had been smiling at the young man. Maybe this was just a drink, after all. Maybe Max wasn't Bennett's type either.

"Nothing, really," Bennett said, checking back over his shoulder to make sure the other men were out of earshot. "I just

never understand someone who'd rather be with a boy than a man. But, hey, to each his own."

Warmth flooded Max's cheeks: embarrassment remembering all the boys he'd tried to drown his sorrows in since Christine had left him and also a sharp pleasure knowing that Bennett liked *men*.

"This is it." Bennett stopped outside an old carriage house. He fumbled around in his pocket for the keys and unlocked the door. "Come on in."

Max wasn't sure what he'd expected from the apartment of a former Air Force pilot from Montana, but it certainly wasn't this clean, modern space, with its cool colors and airy feeling. He briefly wondered if Bennett knew Frederico.

"The company keeps it for meeting with analysts and entertaining investors and—" He waved his hand. "Stuff like that. Make yourself at home. I'll see about that Scotch."

He wandered off toward the kitchen. Max took a seat on the sofa, trying for a casual sprawl, but nerves got the better of him. He perched on the edge of the cushion, jiggling his leg anxiously, wondering when he'd reverted back to being a teenager.

Bennett brought over their drinks and plopped down beside Max. They clinked glasses. Max took a sip, resisting the urge to kick back the entire thing in one gulp. Really, this was starting to get stupid. What was he so nervous about?

Bennett leaned back, draping his arm along the back of the sofa. He seemed perfectly content to enjoy his drink and gaze companionably at Max. It was crazy-making, truly.

"Um," Max fidgeted, "this is—uh, good Scotch." God. He sounded like an idiot.

Bennett nodded agreeably. "Yeah. Twenty-year-old single malt. Only the best for investors and business analysts."

He smiled conspiratorially, and Max felt the heat curl low in his belly. That thing where he'd insisted he wasn't going to fall for Bennett's cowboy charm? Famous last words.

"I, uh—" Max glanced around a little desperately for some conversational gambit before he could blurt out *so, are you going to sleep with me or not?* He went with the first thing he noticed and pointed to a canvas on the opposite wall. "That's an interesting painting."

This was not especially true. It was more of a mess, really, as if the artist had gathered up whatever leftover paint was lying around and flung it at the canvas in a fit of temper or possibly simply to free up some storage space on the paint shelf.

"I never really paid too much attention to it." Bennett tilted his head and considered the picture. "I've got to be honest with you, and it's probably going to horrify your art-loving self, but—"

"Are you going to sleep with me or not?" Max blurted out.

Bennett stopped, blinked, then broke into a slow smile. "Come on, Max. Tell me what's really on your mind."

Was Bennett laughing at him? God, he was. Max felt the heat prickle under his collar. He was going to end up humiliated *and* incur Judith's never-ending wrath for messing up this business prospect. It was just fantastic to be him right now.

"I should probably—" he mumbled, waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the door.

"No, you shouldn't."

Bennett put both their glasses down on the coffee table. He slid his hand along Max's jaw and kissed him.

"Oh, thank God," Max murmured against his lips.

Bennett smiled and tilted Max's chin, taking his time, thoroughly exploring Max's mouth. Max had been hard pretty much since that first blundering kiss outside the restaurant, and

this one was so much better. He couldn't help the hungry little moan that came out of him. Bennett felt so good, his body warm, muscles solid beneath Max's hands, and God, he smelled amazing. Max pressed closer, trying to rub against him like a horny sixteen-year-old.

Bennett breathed words against Max's neck, making him shiver. "And to answer your question: Yeah, I am going to sleep with you, unless you've got some objection to it."

Max shook his head emphatically. "Nope, no objection."

He grabbed Bennett by the lapels of his jacket and pulled him in. Max was an excellent kisser, thank you very much. Even Christine hadn't tried to deny that fact, and never had it felt more important to demonstrate his skill. He took charge of Bennett's mouth, tracing his teeth, twisting their tongues together.

Bennett moaned and grappled at Max's shoulders, and they went tumbling back against the cushions, Bennett half sprawled on top of him. Max's jacket twisted beneath him, pulling tight across his shoulders, restricting his movement, which was absolutely unacceptable. He needed to get his hands on Bennett in the worst possible way. He struggled out of the jacket, and Bennett murmured, "Yeah, yeah," and stripped his own off as well.

Max thrust his hands into Bennett's hair and tugged him down into another kiss. Bennett stroked his hand up and down Max's side, and then pulled Max's shirt free from his waistband, rubbing his thumb flirtatiously along bare skin. Max shuddered at the sensation, his body jerking. In the process, he shifted positions, and then he could feel the heat of Bennett's erection pressing against his thigh.

"God." He'd made Bennett *hard*.

Max pushed up against Bennett's solid body, his cock sliding against Bennett's thigh, and he groaned loudly.

"Yeah, yeah," Bennett panted.

He kissed Max frantically and shoved his hips hard into Max's. Max got his hands under Bennett's shirt, fingers pressing in at the small of his back, pulling him even closer. Max could come just like this, he was pretty sure. In fact, he couldn't think of anything that seemed like a better idea—and he was a genius. He knew all about good ideas.

For some crazy reason, though, Bennett pulled away, getting to his feet. Max made a violent noise of protest and grabbed for him wildly. Bennett had promised they were going to have sex. That qualified as a contract, as far as Max was concerned. He had every intention of holding Bennett to it.

"Come on." Bennett pulled him by the arm. "This is more fun in bed."

Max let Bennett drag him down the hall. The bedroom was plain, white walls and white bedspread and bare floor. They stood near the foot of the bed, and Bennett slid his hand up Max's chest, thumb catching on the buttons of his shirt.

"Can I?"

"Yeah, yeah." Max reached for Bennett's belt, starting to unbuckle it. "I want—"

Bennett kissed him soundly and yanked the shirt off him. *Naked, naked, naked*, a greedy voice chanted in Max's head. He fumbled with Bennett's shirt as he scrambled out of his own pants, getting them tangled around his ankles. He almost toppled over, and Bennett had to catch him by the elbow, steadying him while he kicked away his pants and underwear.

"You, you," Max demanded, atypically monosyllabic for him.

Bennett got the message and stripped off the rest of his clothes. Max drew in his breath sharply. God, Bennett was even more gorgeous naked. He touched his fingers wonderingly to Bennett's side, his chest, the tight, flat muscles of his belly, which quivered at the caress. Max found himself wishing he'd gone to the

gym more often, but Bennett stared and touched back, his palm laid flat against Max's chest moving in appreciative circles. Apparently he wasn't complaining.

Bennett walked Max backwards to the bed, and they toppled onto it, bouncing slightly, making Bennett smile.

"Come here, come here *now*." Max made grabby hands at him.

Bennett smiled even wider and slithered up Max's body, very slowly, the delicious, crazy-making slide of skin on skin.

"God," Max moaned.

Bennett settled on top of him and kissed him deeply. Max realized with a start that even with all the boys and all the sex he'd had with them, he'd never been beneath a naked man before. Clearly, he hadn't known what he was missing. He ran his hands down Bennett's back and cupped his ass, pulling him harder against his body.

"This feels so good," he said breathlessly, not caring how desperate he sounded.

"Mmm, yeah," Bennett murmured against his neck.

He kissed Max's jaw and behind his ear and traced the hollow of his collarbone with the tip of his tongue. Max brushed kisses into Bennett's hair and squeezed his biceps, enjoying the flex of muscle against his palms. Bennett started to kiss down his body, making a detour at his nipples, using his lips and tongue and the edge of his teeth, setting every nerve ending in Max's body on fire.

"Shit!" Max gulped down air, and for a moment, he really thought he was going to come right then, just from that.

Bennett grinned up at him, the picture of smug self-congratulation. Max probably would have taken exception if it hadn't been quite so well-deserved. No one had ever made him almost come from kissing his nipples before.

"I'm going to go down on you now," Bennett declared as casually as he might talk about the weather.

"Shit!" Max said again, more loudly, digging his heels into the mattress, gritting his teeth.

He wasn't going to come before he had that obscenely beautiful mouth on him. He was determined. He pushed at Bennett's shoulders frantically, urging him down. Bennett snuffled a laugh against Max's skin but went easily. He kissed the insides of Max's thighs, fitted his fingers into the hollows of Max's hips, nosed into the thatch of hair at Max's groin. He did pretty much everything but actually touch Max's cock.

"Oh my God, you're a sadist, aren't you? This is payback because I was a jerk at dinner. I knew it! You have no intention of actually sucking my—"

Bennett grabbed Max's hips, held him still, and swallowed him down.

"Fuck!" Max's feet kicked out, his heels sliding on the slick fabric of the bedspread.

Bennett flashed a mischievous look up at Max, eyes bright with amusement. Max thrust his fingers into Bennett's hair, urging him on. He craned his neck, staring down at Bennett's head bobbing between his legs. God, that was hot. Bennett flicked out his tongue, doing filthy, inventive things to Max's cock. Max had always thought that sex that made your eyes roll back into your head was just a cliché. He'd been so very wrong.

Bennett stroked Max's balls with his fingers, and then his touch began to travel backwards, skating along Max's perineum, rubbing lightly at his hole. Max tensed. He'd never.... He was really beginning to see how limited his gay experience had been. Bennett must have felt his reaction, because he didn't push the finger in. He just kept circling and exploring and teasing. It felt startlingly good, better than Max had ever imagined it would. He took a breath and let it out and relaxed into the touch. Bennett

sucked him harder, took him deeper, Max's cock sliding into his throat, as he eased a finger very gently inside him.

"Nnnngrh!" was the embarrassing sound that came spilling out of Max.

He pushed back against Bennett's hand. Bennett hummed approvingly, and the vibration against Max's cock sent him right over the edge. His eyes flew shut, and his hips bucked up, and he came in Bennett's mouth.

Bennett pulled back and wiped his mouth with his hand. He was grinning. Max pulled at his arm, tugging him down for a kiss, because he was far too lazy to move himself. He could taste himself in Bennett's mouth. He'd never found that sexy before, but apparently there was a first time for everything.

In that spirit, he recklessly offered, "You can fuck me if you want."

Bennett kissed him again. "I'm not going to say no to that."

He reached into the bedside table and fumbled around and came up with condoms and a bottle of lube.

"Turn over." Bennett nudged at Max's shoulder.

Max flipped onto his stomach and spread his legs, and suddenly the post-orgasmic haze vanished. He couldn't breathe, because what the hell had he just said? Since when did he want to get fucked? Bennett settled along Max's side, kissing his neck. Max could feel his erection brushing against his hip. God. He was going to get fucked. He wrapped his arms around the pillow, his hands tangled up tightly in the pillowcase.

"You look so good like this," Bennett murmured against his shoulder.

Max could hear the snap of the cap on the lube bottle. Bennett warmed the lube in his hands and then lightly stroked the crease of Max's ass. Max jerked sharply, surprised even

though he knew it was coming. Bennett kissed his neck some more, the scrape of stubble sending shivers all down Max's back.

"Just relax," Bennett soothed him.

He kept stroking deeper and deeper between Max's cheeks, until he was touching Max's entrance. Max took a breath and let it out and reminded himself how good it had felt before. Bennett pressed his finger inside, and Max tensed instantly. Because it wasn't just going to be Bennett's fingers this time. God, he was going to get fucked.

"Been a while, huh?" Bennett said sympathetically.

"Um," Max mumbled, "you could say that."

Bennett kissed Max's shoulder, moved his hand in comforting circles over Max's back. "Just let go. I've got you."

Max closed his eyes and thought at himself, *Stop being such a control freak*. He took a breath and let it out slowly, and his shoulders dropped.

"Okay," he said a little shakily.

Bennett worked his finger deeper inside, and it burned, burned, until....

"Fuck!" Max's head snapped up from the pillow, and his hips pushed back against Bennett's hand.

Bennett laughed softly. "That's the spot, huh?"

He stroked and teased, and every touch sent pyrotechnic sparks all through Max's body.

"Joe," Max gasped, pushing his hips against the mattress even though he'd only just come and getting it up again would be just shy of miraculous.

Joe added another finger, and he was still touching that place. Max felt full in a way that made him desperate for more. Whatever fear he'd had pretty much went out the window.

“Just fuck me already!” he demanded, bucking up impatiently.

Joe kissed Max’s shoulder, and Max could feel his smile against his skin. “Whatever you say.”

He pulled away, and Max made a wild sound of protest despite himself. He could hear the crinkle of the condom wrapper, the soft, wet sounds of Joe slicking his cock, and then Joe stretched out along his back. “You ready?”

“What part of ‘just fuck me already’ do you not understand?” Max snapped, because turned on and frustrated was not exactly a recipe for patience.

Not that he’d ever had much patience to begin with.

Joe laughed. “You’re funny, you know that?”

Max started to fire back an indignant answer, but then Joe entered him in one stroke, and whatever Max was going to say was lost in a loud gasp. Joe stilled, giving Max time to adjust, but frankly, Max wasn’t sure there was that much time in the universe. He panted, and sweat broke out on his forehead.

“Okay?” Joe asked, smoothing his hands down Max’s arms.

“Um—okay,” he said shakily.

Joe pushed in a little more. It burned, making Max’s eyes water. He started to shake. God, he really couldn’t understand why anyone had ever let him do this to them. Were there really that many masochists in the world? Joe pulled out and thrust back in shallowly. Max sucked in a breath, ready to yell, “Take it out! Oh my God, are you just a sadistic bastard or what? Take. It. Out!”

But then, Joe tilted Max’s hips up and slid in a little more, and Max shouted, not words exactly, just violent-sounding encouragement. Suddenly, the sensation of having Joe plastered to his back, having Joe *inside* him, was the best thing ever.

“God,” Joe muttered, his voice low and gravelly. “Do you have any idea how hot you are?”

“Yes, yes,” Max said. “Whatever. Just fuck me.”

He spread his legs wider and slid his hand beneath his body. Apparently miracles did happen, because his cock was getting hard again. He wrapped his palm around it, stroking hopefully. Joe fell into a rhythm, moving deeper and deeper, and Max started to push back into the thrusts.

“Yeah, yeah,” Max chanted, stroking his cock.

Joe rested his cheek against Max’s shoulder. Max could feel the heat pouring off him, could feel his breath coming in uneven puffs. His thrusts became wilder, more erratic, and Max bit his lip and jerked himself more intently.

“Max,” Joe groaned. He seized up and went silent, coming inside Max.

That was all Max needed. “Shit!” He spilled into his own hand.

Joe collapsed on top of him and stayed there until finally Max had to say, “You know, you’re pretty heavy for a skinny guy.”

Joe chuckled and eased out of him, getting rid of the condom. He flopped back onto the bed, and that probably should have been Max’s cue to get up, put his clothes on, and get out. Sleeping with a prospective client wasn’t the best idea he’d ever had. Lingering over it would just make it worse. But two orgasms in one night, and Max’s eyes started to droop. He really did feel entirely too comfortable to move.

When he woke up, he thought at first he was in his own bed. It was still dark out, the very early hours of the morning, and he sighed contentedly at the idea of going back to sleep. He stretched and yawned and turned onto his side to settle back down for a few more hours of rest. And bumped into the warm body beside him. His eyes flew open wide, and his heart started to pound. Belatedly,

he felt the dull ache in his ass where.... He lay there staring up at the ceiling for a minute or two, silently freaking out.

Finally, whatever feeble excuse he had for a sense of self-preservation kicked in, and he carefully sat up and slipped out of bed. He gathered up his clothes in the dark, thankfully managing not to knock anything over. He went out to the living room and gingerly got dressed. He felt sticky in places he preferred not to think about, but he'd have to wait until he got home to do anything about it. He cast one last glance back at the darkened bedroom and fled.

Chapter Four

AT WORK, Max tried to keep his head down and avoid making eye contact, as if anyone who took too close a look at him would know he'd spent the night before losing what little was left of his virginity. Oh, yeah, and quite possibly ruining Tomlin Foster's chances to land a new client.

He hurried past Carl, the security guard, barely nodding. He sailed by the front desk before the receptionist could get out so much as "good morning." He holed up in his office, door closed, and managed not to yell to high heaven when he started up his email and found his inbox had been dive-bombed by at least a billion replies from overly optimistic job-seekers who felt sure they had what it took to keep up with a genius. He even limited his morning coffee runs to two, darting down the hall to the kitchen, grabbing three mugs at a time, and sneaking back as stealthily as a ninja.

So it was ironic, not to mention annoying, that it was the call of nature that ultimately got him busted. He came out of the men's room, prepared to make a break for his office, only to run headlong into Judith, who was waiting for him in the hallway.

"Aaaaaaaagh!" he screamed, practically jumping out of his skin. "What? Are you *trying* to give me a heart attack? Sometimes I think you really do want to do me in, so you can have the agency all to yourself."

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I've never imagined it," Judith answered, deadpan. "What have you been doing with yourself? I haven't seen you all morning. You haven't even mentioned how it went with Bennett last night."

"It wasn't my—" *Fault*, he started to blurt out, and then he realized that maybe he should sound more like, oh, *Max Tomlin*. "I've been doing many very important things this morning. No time for chitchat. I'm an extremely busy man, you know."

He hightailed it back to his office, doing his best to leave Judith in the dust. He was just flinging his door closed behind him when a pale, bony hand reached out to grab it and push it open. Judith's expression had gone from concerned to dangerous.

"Okay, Max, spill it. Why are you acting so squirrely? What did you do last night?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "And don't say 'nothing'. We both know I won't believe you."

"I, uh—" Max stuttered, and then just blurted out, "slept with him, okay? You happy now?"

Judith stared at him, not even blinking. "Did you just say you slept with our prospective client?"

Max hung his head. "I couldn't help myself, okay? It could happen to anyone."

Judith seemed to be having problems keeping up. "Joe Bennett slept with *you*?"

"Yes!" Max said huffily. "Thanks so much for the bug-eyed disbelief. People have on occasion been known to find me attractive, you know."

Perhaps Max shouldn't have been so eager for Judith to believe him, because now her mouth pressed into a thin, displeased line. "Are we still even invited to this pitch? We all know your track record with relationships."

Max put his hands on his hips. "That's only when people get to know me. This was a one-night stand. And I'll have you know the sex was very good!"

Judith gave him a long, speculative look, her lips pursed, as if Max were a new handbag she was contemplating buying. It was not the most flattering feeling in the world.

"You know," she said, tapping her finger against her chin, "this could work to our advantage. I think you should pursue the relationship. And by relationship, of course, I mean sex."

Max's mouth dropped open. "I'm not that cheap!"

"That's not what I've heard," Judith said cheerfully.

He could feel himself coloring. "It was just one time! At the holiday party. I was drunk! I can't believe you're trying to pimp me out to land a new account."

Judith smiled sweetly. "We do need a sound system to go with that expensive new conference table."

Max reached for one of his awards to throw at her but dithered over which one he was willing to sacrifice. By the time he'd hefted his Cresta and turned, she was long gone.

THAT afternoon, Max had his standing appointment with his therapist. Dr. Ellen Tanner was a tidy woman with short, dark hair, drably professional pleated skirts, and a poker face so absolutely impenetrable that after almost ten years of seeing her, Max still had no idea whether she liked him or not. Not that he worried about things like that. Of course he didn't. The good news was that he did seem to be making progress in their work together. They'd recently agreed he could cut down his sessions to only twice a week.

At precisely two o'clock on the dot, the door to Dr. Tanner's office opened. "Max, you can come in now."

He trudged inside and flopped down onto the couch. It had been an eventful week. He had a lot to talk about.

"I know you'll think I'm crazy," he began.

Dr. Tanner said mildly, "You're not crazy, Max. And I'm not here to make value judgments."

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved his hand dismissively. He’d heard it before, many times. “I swear Judith is trying to kill me. First, she colludes with Kate Hoffman to saddle me with a male model for an assistant, which is just lighting the way to ruin for me. And then she practically threatens to throw me out the window over some little expenditure for office furniture. And just this morning she was lying in wait for me outside the men’s room and practically gave me a coronary. She wants the agency all to herself!”

“Don’t you think perhaps you’re reading a little too much into her actions?”

“It’s only paranoia when they’re not trying to kill you!” Max insisted.

The look on Dr. Tanner’s face remained so stubbornly unrevealing Max was certain she must be trying to cover up something really bad, something like: *Why do I get all the crazy ones?*

“So, what else has been going on in your life?” she prompted.

“Well, then there’s Marco. He also wants me dead.”

Max described the atrocity with the nuts and how Marco had apparently broken up with him in an illiterate note scrawled in strawberry jam, which Max didn’t even *like*. He segued from there into a grievance-by-grievance replay of all his recent relationships. This took much of the hour—or, to be more precise, the forty-eight minutes. When Dr. Tanner started surreptitiously glancing at her watch, Max had his cue that their session was winding down.

“Oh yeah, and I slept with one of my prospective clients, and I let him fuck me, and I liked it, and then I may have had what could be termed a ‘gay freakout’. Hey, look at that. Time’s up. Well, see you next session.” He scrambled to his feet.

Dr. Tanner held up a hand. “Wait. What was that last part?”

Max heaved a sigh and sank back down onto the couch. “He was really hot,” he said feebly.

“How do you feel about what happened?” Dr. Tanner asked, sounding concerned.

Max got a sudden flash of Joe, the way he'd looked as Max undressed him, how it had felt to be naked with him, to have Joe's weight on top of him, Joe's cock inside him. Warmth flared in Max's belly, and suddenly his cock pressed uncomfortably against his zipper. Oh, God! He'd just gotten an erection in front of his therapist. If he hadn't been traumatized for life before, he certainly was now.

He jumped to his feet, his face flooding with heat. “I've got to—really important meeting!”

He bolted from the room. Apparently, fleeing for his life was becoming something of a habit.

BACK at the office, Max's afternoon dragged along with conference calls and creative meetings. Mostly, he thought about Joe, surfacing out of his musings every now and then to throw out a snide *Is it your first day at advertising school? or I'd really have to fire someone who couldn't come up with a better idea than that.* Then he'd sink back into his thoughts. The thing was, against all odds, he actually liked Joe. And he wanted this business, and he was determined to rescue Joe's company from the clutches of Omnion. He hadn't been able to save his own legacy, the one he'd built with Christine. Saving Joe's would be the next best thing. Judith might not have been tactful, but she hadn't been wrong about Max's track record with relationships. It really, really sucked. He didn't want the thing between him and Joe to suck.

Suddenly, what he needed to do became perfectly clear. He had to go see Joe—no, no, *Bennett*—and tell him last night had been a mistake.

He breathed out in relief at the decision and interrupted one of his underlings in the middle of a pun so truly embarrassing he found it hard to believe he'd actually hired her. "I've seen enough. Go." He waved his hands. "Make me something better."

They scuttled out of his office, and he grabbed his jacket and hurried to the elevator. He needed to have this conversation face to face. The entire way to Bennett's office, he practiced his speech in his head: *Last night should never have happened. It has to be all business from now on.*

The receptionist at Avionics smiled politely when he gave her his name. She phoned Bennett's office and then told Max, "He can see you, Mr. Tomlin. If you just follow this hallway, his assistant's desk is at the end of it."

Bennett's assistant was called Gloria, according to the nameplate on her desk. She was an absolutely eye-popping young redhead, and Max felt a twisting stab of jealousy. Bennett had said he was bisexual, and Max knew that if he himself hadn't been as irrevocably homosexual as he absolutely was, no matter what anyone else thought to the contrary, he might have found Gloria really quite.... *Stop it*, he thought firmly. He'd come to tell Bennett he wasn't going to sleep with him anymore. It didn't matter what kind of shenanigans Bennett got up to with his assistant.

"Mr. Bennett said to send you right in, Mr. Tomlin."

"Thank you," Max told her, doing his best to smile.

It wasn't her fault she was sleeping with Bennett when he wasn't allowed to anymore.

"Hey," Bennett said, getting up from his desk as Max stepped into his office.

He looked pleased, if somewhat surprised, at the visit. Max had slept with him and then promptly run away. That kind of thing was bound to be confusing.

"I, uh," Max stammered.

Bennett raised an eyebrow quizzically.

Max pulled himself together. "There's something I need to tell you. I've thought it over, and I really think we should—"

Bennett's cell phone rang, and he checked the number. "Sorry. I need to take this. I'll just be a minute." He spoke into the phone, "Yeah, Hal, what'd you find out for me?"

Max stood by Bennett's desk, restlessly fiddling with the juvenile bric-a-brac Bennett seemed fond of: model planes and Matchbox cars and one of those contraptions with the hanging metal balls that bumped into each other that Max had never understood the point of.

"Do we have all the numbers in?" Bennett's forehead creased with concentration. "What about Ferguson's group?"

Max couldn't help but watch him. God, he looked good, with his crisp white shirt and his sleeves rolled up to reveal strong forearms. His hair was a mess, but a sexy mess, falling into his eyes. Suddenly, Max was in motion, rounding the corner of the desk, taking Joe by the hip, pulling him around. He dropped to his knees, opening Joe's pants with a few quick flourishes of his wrist. He'd gotten good at that since he'd become a gay man. He bent his head and took Joe's cock in his mouth.

"What are you doing?" Joe hissed at him.

But he was getting hard in Max's mouth, and he certainly wasn't pushing Max away. So Max went at him with gusto, licking at the head, using his teeth lightly on the circumcision scar, tracing patterns on the shaft with his tongue, and finally taking Joe's cock as deep as he could, doing his best to suck his brains out.

"Um," Joe stuttered stupidly into the phone. "Yeah. That's... good. Look into that for me."

Max flicked his gaze up, and Joe stared down at him, a hungry glint in his eyes that made Max's stomach twist with excitement. He sucked harder.

“Okay, okay,” Joe said in a breathless rush. “Check in tomorrow. Got to go.”

He snapped the phone closed and tossed it onto the desk, slid his hands into Max’s hair, and proceeded to fuck his face.

“God,” he moaned. “Max.”

Before long, he came in Max’s mouth.

Max swallowed until Joe was done and then pulled back, kind of dazed. He really hadn’t expected to do that. Joe tugged at his shoulder, pulling him up to his feet. He wiped Max’s chin with his thumb and smoothed a hand over his hair.

“So, you came to see me to—”

“Tell you it has to be all business from now on,” Max said absently.

Joe quirked a smile. His eyes were shot through with warmth, and Max really couldn’t remember the last person who’d looked at him like that. Christine, maybe, before the mere sight of him was more than she could stand.

Joe pulled Max in for a kiss, licking lazily at his bottom lip, making him shiver. “Let me lock the door, and we can get back to business.” He rubbed Max’s erection through his pants.

Max imagined Joe pushing his pants down, bending him over the desk....

He grabbed Joe’s hand and pulled it away from his crotch. This was quite possibly the most difficult thing he’d ever done in his life. At the very least, it made his top ten list.

“No,” he managed. “I don’t want—I *can’t* mess this up.”

He took a step back and another and turned. Gloria looked startled as he went rushing past her desk.

Yeah, yeah, Max thought. *He’s all yours now.*

Chapter Five

IF MAX was giving up the best sex of his life to win Bennett's account and save his company, then he damned well was going to win the account and save the company. He returned to the agency and went straight into Judith's office, waving off her assistant, who tried to stop him with a hasty, "She's in with Mr. Lawson right now, Mr. Tomlin."

He stormed in anyway, ignoring Judith's raised eyebrow and Ted Lawson's scandalized expression, and demanded, "I need Quinn's new cell number."

"What makes you think I have it?" Judith asked with a wholly unbelievable innocent expression.

Max rolled his eyes. "You can't put me off. So don't waste your breath."

"I made a promise to Quinn that I'd respect his privacy."

"Yes, yes, he doesn't want me to have the number. I realize that, and I don't care."

"Max, he's not the same—"

"I'm perfectly well aware he's gone all flower child on us. But if I'm going to win the Avionics account, I need the Strategy Doctor on it. So are you going to give me the number, or am I going to stand here all day interrupting your fascinating meeting?" He gave Ted a flat, insincere smile. "Nice tie."

Judith sighed. "Fine, fine, but tell Quinn it's not my fault." She scribbled the number on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

Max nodded magnanimously. “Feel free to go back to your very important discussion of pie charts.”

On the way to his office, he called Quinn, got voicemail, and left a message. “All right, Quinn, it’s time to get over the nervous breakdown and get back to work. I’ve got an account to win, and I need you on it. I’ll see you first thing tomorrow morning. Or I will come up there to your hippie granola commune and drag you back to the city.” He started to end the call and then thought to add, “It’s Max Tomlin, by the way.”

He swung by Isabel and Jason’s office next. It looked like a kindergarten classroom, as most creative offices tended to, all primary colors and beanbag chairs, with action figures scattered around. Max assumed those must belong to Jason, or possibly they’d inherited them from the creative team before them. He really couldn’t imagine Isabel bringing them in. He found the two of them huddled around Jason’s computer, reviewing the auditions for Little Miss Wisconsin Dairy. Max cringed at the sight of the dimpled darling on screen.

“I want you to put aside everything else you’re working on,” he told them. “I need you on the Avionics pitch. Kick off tomorrow morning, eight o’clock, my office.”

“But Max,” Isabel frowned with concern, “the clients are expecting—”

“I don’t care about those cheese-eaters,” he said dismissively. “We’ve got an account to win.”

He continued on to his office with a rueful glance at the empty cubicle outside. He plunked down at his desk, checked his email, and found that the craigslist annoyance of the morning had now become a catastrophe of truly epic proportions. His inbox was so hopelessly log-jammed with hopeful resumes his email had crashed, and he wasn’t getting messages he actually *wanted*. He stormed out of his office.

“Does no one care that the most important person in this company can’t get anything done because his email is being invaded by every deadbeat in this city with a third-grade education and access to the Internet?”

He glanced around expectantly, but everyone carefully avoided meeting his eyes, concentrating on their work as if their lives depended on it.

“You’re all out to get me, aren’t you?” he fumed.

“Um, excuse me? Maybe I can help?” someone said from behind him.

He whirled around, and a young woman stood there. She had curly brown hair, round cheeks, and a backpack slung over her shoulder. She looked like she should be getting on the bus to junior high school, but these days, everyone looked like a kid to Max. She could be the new head of the IT department, for all he knew. Remembering people’s names, or faces, or pretty much anything about them at all, wasn’t necessarily his strong suit.

“So, you’re, um—” He snapped his fingers, as if he expected it to come to him.

“We haven’t met, actually.” She held out her hand. “I’m Abby Donald. I saw your ad on craigslist. I figured you’d have a million replies, so I thought, hey, why not take a chance and stop by?” She handed him a copy of her resume. “As you can see, I have my undergraduate degree from Columbia in journalism, with a minor in communication technologies. I speak Spanish, Japanese and German. Type seventy-eight words a minute. Make a mean cup of coffee. And there’s never been a piece of office equipment I can’t fix.”

Max asked the most important question of all. “Can you rescue my inbox from the email bomb that’s gone off in it?”

“That should take me about thirty seconds,” she said in a way that made him actually believe her.

“You’re hired,” he told her. “Now fix my computer and get me some coffee.”

THE team assembled bright and early the next morning in Max’s office—Isabel, Jason, Sanderson, Max himself—everyone but Quinn. Max was *this* close to calling in Abby and telling her to book him on the next Amtrak bound for Sixties-throwback-ville. But, finally, at almost a quarter of nine, because apparently Quinn was on granola time, he came stomping into the office, looking harried, not to mention unwashed, flailing his arms at Max.

“All right, all right already, I’m here. I hope you’re happy!” He sank melodramatically onto the nearest empty chair.

“Deliriously,” Max answered dryly.

He’d known Quinn Gallagher since his first day on the job in the advertising business. They’d both started out at Lang and Straithern, Max as a lowly junior copywriter slash coffee-fetching gopher, Quinn as a research assistant in the new business department. They’d struck up a friendship in the company lunchroom, bonding over their mutual resentment at being peons and their similarly grandiose intentions to own this industry one day.

They’d climbed the ladder of professional advancement nearly in tandem, and when Max had been ready to go out on his own, to open up Hunter & Tomlin with Christine, Quinn came along for the ride as their chief strategist. He was pretty much the only asset Max had managed to keep in the divorce.

A little over a year ago, Quinn had had a heart attack scare—just a scare, as Max was always quick to point out, not even an honest-to-God myocardial infarction—and he’d gone... well, *squirrelly* was the word Max used most often to describe it. Quinn had started reading books about Eastern religious practices,

taking classes in Bikram yoga, and drinking tea he brewed out of weeds that smelled like something grown in the Freshkills landfill. Finally, he'd cracked up altogether, declaring that being corporate America's evil genius blocked his chi or some nonsense like that. He'd sold off his co-op and all his worldly belongings and gone to live in an ashram in upstate New York where they raised goats and made homemade beeswax candles to sell on the Internet.

Quinn's time at the ashram had certainly not done him any sartorial favors. The man who had dressed every day of his business life in Saville Row tailoring currently wore a pair of exceedingly dirty-looking chinos, a shirt that Max was fairly sure had been woven out of grass, and a big, chunky necklace of what appeared to be insect larvae. In his salad days, Quinn had gone to the barber every week like clockwork, visited a manicurist regularly, and been widely credited with inspiring the term "metrosexual," if not actually coining it himself. Now his scraggly hair tumbled past his shoulders and didn't seem to have been washed in... well, *days* was being generous. There were actual bits of straw sticking out of it. His beard could have put Grizzly Adams to shame.

"So, Quinn," Max said. "It's good of you to join us in civilization."

"Can it, Max," Quinn sniped at him. Apparently, the ashram hadn't done anything to improve his notorious Irish temper. "You've pulled me away from a very busy time back at the compound. We're just about ready to harvest our mung bean crop. So I'd really like to get down to it if you don't mind."

"Fine, fine," Max breezed ahead. "As you all know, we've been invited to pitch for Avionics. It's a chance for us to add a plum account to our technology portfolio with a visionary company that's doing groundbreaking work to make air travel safer for everyone. Their founder and CEO Joe Bennett truly has his finger on the pulse of aviation. But now, his company is under attack from Omnion, and we need to come up with the most heart-

stopping public image campaign the world has ever seen, the stuff that makes grown men cry. So it's safe for Avionics to continue making the skies safe for us. You all have the creative brief. Sanderson, is there anything you want to add to it?"

"Avionics is just about ten years old," she said. "It has approximately a thousand employees, an estimated net worth of five hundred million dollars. They posted an impressive twenty-four percent increase in profit last year. It's a high-growth company that's continuing to do a lot of R&D work. The anti-mid-air crash technology is just the beginning. That's why they've attracted the attention of Omnion."

"Do we know how many other agencies have been invited to the pitch?" Quinn asked, giving Sanderson an interested look that Max suspected was something more than mere curiosity about Avionics.

Max threw up in his mouth a little. The thought of Sanderson—Quinn, too, for that matter—in any sort of romantic situation made him queasy.

"We're up against four other agencies," Sanderson said, "although we don't know which ones."

"Actually, we do know one," Max interjected. "Hunter & Campbell."

Quinn did a double take. "Do you mean to say you've been talking to Christine?"

Max's mouth pulled into an unhappy line. "She called to gloat. I'm not sure that counts as talking."

Quinn shook his head. "Women'll be the death of us all."

"Not me," Max declared smugly.

"Ah, yes," Quinn said with a bemused expression that Max didn't appreciate. "I keep forgetting about your recent flirtation with homosexuality."

Jason snickered. Max shot him a dirty look.

"Does Avionics already have an established brand identity?" Isabel asked.

Max could always depend on her to be grown-up and professional.

He shook his head. "They have a logo. It's ugly. Let's add redesigning it to our list of things to do."

Isabel nodded and jotted a note to herself.

"I'd like to see as much of their corporate communications as I can get my hands on," Quinn said.

Sanderson told him, "I have some samples. I'm working on getting more. But so far, it really seems to be—"

"The work of dropouts from the nearest vo-tech school," Max finished the sentence for her, although probably not in the way Sanderson intended. "Avionics has no real competitors. They haven't spent any time or money on marketing, because they haven't needed to. That's another reason why they're such a prime target for Omnion."

"When's the presentation?" Jason asked, apparently not asleep with his eyes open as Max had been assuming.

"Three weeks from Monday. I want to meet every morning starting tomorrow to review our progress. This account is really important. If we lose it, I promise to make all your lives miserable." He paused and then turned to Quinn. "Okay, fine, so you already have goat-herding and vegetarianism to ruin your life, but I'm inventive. I will figure out a way to make you even more miserable."

"Wow, it's great to be back, Max," Quinn deadpanned. "Thank you."

“Think nothing of it,” Max said cheerfully. “Now go, go, all of you!” He waved his arms at them. “Come back when you have something brilliant.”

As they streamed out, Abby came in. Before Max could bark “coffee” at her, she sat a fresh mug down in front of him. He tasted it, and it was just the way he liked it, which was something of an accomplishment, since Max’s preference in coffee varied by the time of day. His first ten cups or so, he mainlined straight. After that, he liked it to taste like candy.

“Here are your phone messages.” She placed a neat pink stack on the desk. “I answered your routine emails, sorted the mail, and made an appointment at the dentist for you for next Tuesday. I noticed the reminder on your online calendar. Can I get you anything else?”

He blinked. “Uh. No.” He wasn’t sure he’d ever given that answer to this particular question in his entire life.

Abby smiled. “I’ll be at my desk if you think of anything.”

After she’d gone, Max leaned back in his chair, cupped his coffee mug in his hands, and thought scornfully about Kate Hoffman’s claim that good administrative help was wasted on him. Clearly, if he wanted something done right, he simply had to do it himself.

Max spent the rest of the day and a good portion of the evening learning everything he could about the aviation industry, Joe’s company, and Omnion. He was bleary-eyed by the time he stumbled downstairs to hail a cab.

In the morning, the team reconvened and began brainstorming. Thirty minutes into it, Max was already scowling.

“Is that the best you have?” he snorted with disdain. “We need something moving! Something elegant! We’re trying to save a man’s life’s work here. Do you people not get that?”

"This Bennett guy must be really good-looking," Jason said under his breath to Isabel.

Max glared at him.

Quinn said, "I think we're all agreed we haven't hit on the big idea yet. The thing is, there's so much putting your tiny bits of liquid into clear plastic bags these days that air travel just isn't sexy. We need a way to remind people why they want to fly and then position Avionics as the company that makes us even safer when we're in the skies."

"Safety," Max said contemplatively. "Obviously, that's what Avionics is selling, but I don't want to play on fear. I want to find an emotional benefit that's inspiring."

Sanderson rolled her eyes. "This is business-to-business advertising, Max, for a technology company. Don't go all fruity on me."

"Is that a slur against my sexual orientation?" he asked, affronted.

"No," she said with a perky smile. "It's a slur against your creative flakiness."

Max cut his eyes at her and once again rued that looks couldn't actually kill. "All right, people. We've got nothing. Go work harder and bring me something."

The rest of the week went by in pretty much the same fashion; the list of weak ideas that weren't nearly good enough for Joe piled up like garbage bags during a sanitation strike. Finally, Max had to move their morning briefings from eight to seven, because, as he put it: "Clearly you need more hours in the day if this dreck is all you have to show for yourselves."

All the while, he tried not to think about Joe as anything other than the client and failed utterly. At least he hadn't given in to the impulse to call, because if he had, he surely would have

blurted out that he excelled at multitasking and why didn't they get together to discuss strategy and trade blowjobs?

Max held on to his self-restraint by his fingernails.

He never would have guessed that Isabel, of all people, would be the force that tipped the balance in his epic battle of willpower, but really, why should he have been surprised? It just went to prove that everyone was, in fact, out to get him.

The whole thing began innocuously enough. They were gathered in Max's office for some late-night brainstorming. They'd made a bit of progress on the campaign by then, although not nearly enough to suit Max. He often found it helped to go back to the beginning, recap what they'd learned, and try to find a new angle on it.

Isabel had brought along some clippings of interviews with Bennett and articles about his company. "He really is rather inspirational," she said and read them a quote. *"Flying is the great love of my life. I'll always remember how it felt the first time I took the controls. It was a little Cessna 190, and a friend of my dad's had taken us up for the afternoon. I was only nine years old, but the moment I got my hand on the stick, I knew what I'd be doing for the rest of my life. So it's my mission to make flying safer, yes. To prevent accidents, yes. But also to help preserve and pass along that sense of wonder that's been the biggest discovery of my life."*

Max just sat there when she'd finished, blindsided by the most inconvenient memories: the slight catch in Joe's voice when he talked about his love of flying, the way he'd looked going down on Max, how he tasted when Max kissed him. Isabel watched him expectantly, waiting for a response.

He cleared his throat. "Uh. Yes. I suppose he's not entirely a hopeless case."

The corner of Jason's mouth tilted up. "Let me see that article." Isabel handed it over, and Jason held it up, showing off the picture of Joe. "Yep. Good-looking. Just like I thought.

Wouldn't have thought he was your type, though, Tomlin. Looks like he's over twenty."

Max lifted his chin. "You realize, of course, that New York is a right-to-work state. I don't actually need a reason to fire you."

Jason laughed, completely unconcerned. Max had the unpleasant thought that maybe he was losing his reputation for being a bastard. He resolved to be much more intimidating in the future.

The conversation lurched on. Sanderson shared the most recent information she'd gotten from Avionics, answers to questions they'd sent over, a survey of attitudes about air travel, some data comparing the numbers of mid-air collisions before and after the advent of Avionics' technology. Quinn floated some tagline ideas. A few had promise, although Max still felt there was something missing.

Mostly, he had trouble concentrating. Now that he'd started to think about Joe, he couldn't seem to stop. The way Joe smelled when Max pressed his face against his throat. How his broad palms felt skimming over Max's sides. How his long legs tangled with Max's as they lay in bed together.

"All right, all right, enough." Max got to his feet, shooing them. "Out of my office. Go do your own thinking. I can't be babysitting you."

He waited until they were safely back in their offices, grabbed his jacket, and dashed to the elevator. A cab pulled over to the curb to let someone out just as Max left the building. He took that as a sign the universe approved of his plan to go to Joe's and grovel for sex. There wasn't even much traffic, and the cabbie dropped him outside Joe's carriage house less than fifteen minutes later.

He knocked and waited and tried not to fidget. The door opened, and there stood Joe, tie undone, collar unbuttoned,

sleeves rolled up. Max felt his mouth go dry. How did the man manage to get sexier every time Max saw him?

Joe lifted an eyebrow at him. "Not who I was expecting."

"Yes, yes, I suppose I wouldn't be."

He pushed his way inside, because waiting to be invited had never gotten him anywhere in life.

Joe closed the door after him. "I thought we weren't going to do this, Max. You said—"

"Forget what I said!" Max declared. "That was an extremely rare instance of my having an actual bad idea."

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. He had a stubborn expression Max didn't much like. "I'm not going to lie. I wasn't any too happy when you ran out on me *again*. But the more I got to thinking about it, the more sense you started making. This isn't how I do things, Max. I have a line. Sleeping with someone who's competing for my business crosses it." He sighed heavily. "But there you were that first night at dinner, with all that," he waved his hand, "blustery charm of yours."

"Charm?" Max said hopefully. Most people just found his bluster obnoxious. "Come on, Joe. We can keep work and personal stuff separate. We're men! We compartmentalize. That's what we do!" Joe looked as if he might be wavering, so Max went in for the kill. "It's not as if you even have the last word on the agency selection, right? Doesn't your board have to vote on it?"

"Well, yeah," Joe said hesitantly.

Max took a step closer. "I want this business, and I want to go on having sex with you, and I've never been very good at not getting what I want."

Joe narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing Max. "Just so you know," he said, "I'm not going to tell you anything I haven't shared with the other agencies. Wouldn't be fair."

“Fine, fine. I want you for your cock, not your insider information.” He hooked a hand behind Joe’s neck and kissed him just to make his intentions perfectly clear.

“Well, in that case.” Joe crowded Max up against the wall and kissed him back.

It was as if a switch had been flipped from “off” to “on,” and all the urgency that had driven Max the whole way there returned in an overwhelming rush. He scrabbled at Joe’s shoulders, trying to pull him closer. “Fuck me, fuck me. I want you to fuck me,” he said frantically.

Joe laughed softly, the sound tickling Max’s neck. “I’ll even make you dinner first.” He pulled back and kissed Max on the cheek. “Come on.”

He slung an arm across Max’s shoulders and led him to the kitchen. A pot simmered on the stove, and the scent of dinner wafting in the air made Max’s stomach rumble.

“I hope you like duck stew,” Joe said.

Max raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, hey, if you don’t, we can always—”

“No, no,” Max said quickly. “It smells fantastic. I just thought your cooking would be more... down home-y.”

“Yeah, well, you missed braised raccoon night.”

Max laughed, and then stopped. “You are kidding, right?”

“Yes,” Joe said with exaggerated patience. “I am kidding. There is civilization outside of New York City, I swear to you, Max. You really need to get over this fear you have of the middle of the country.”

“I will,” Max said, not very convincingly. “You know, someday.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” Joe said with a roll of his eyes. He moved over to the wine rack. “Merlot okay?”

Max nodded. Joe pulled out a bottle, opened it, poured a glass for Max, and waited for him to taste it.

"Nice," Max said.

Joe poured a glass for himself. "So, how was your day?"

Max shrugged. "Okay. We made some progress on—" He broke off abruptly. He'd spent all day working on the pitch for Avionics, and he couldn't exactly discuss that with Joe. He wanted to wow him with the finished product, not share the fumbling play-by-play. Besides, he'd promised they wouldn't mix business with pleasure. "Um, so how was your day?"

"Oh, you know," Joe said vaguely, and Max interpreted this to mean he'd been busy doing something related to the agency search.

They eyed each other awkwardly for a moment.

"Clearly we're going to have to move beyond our mutual workaholism to find things in common," Max said dryly, "or dinner is going to be a rather dull affair."

"I think we can handle it if we really try." Joe's quick smile showed off his dimples.

Max temporarily lost his train of thought.

"So," Joe picked up the conversational slack, "you much of a football fan, Max?"

"Define 'fan'."

Joe laughed. "I'm going to take that for a 'no' then."

"I've never seen the appeal of grown men wearing a hundred pounds of padding piling on top of each other."

"I played some ball in high school and college," Joe offered.

Max sighed. "Of course you did." Joe had *jock who got all the girls* written all over him. "You were the quarterback, weren't you?"

Joe's eyes widened with surprise. "How'd you know?"

"Just—" Max waved his hand as if to say, *Look at you.*

"So, you weren't into sports." Joe took a sip of his wine, eyeing Max curiously over the rim of his glass. "What did you do in high school?"

"President of the debate club," Max said. "My personality has a tendency to get me into trouble. You may have noticed that. I decided I'd better work on my powers of persuasion."

"A skill that's served you well." Joe smiled, his eyes warm.

There was no resisting that. Max walked over to him, cupped his jaw, and kissed him soundly. Joe kissed back just as eagerly. Max pulled at his shoulders, and Joe pushed him up against the counter.

"God, yeah," Max murmured, threading his fingers through Joe's thick hair.

Joe rubbed against him, their thighs sliding together. Max dragged his hands down Joe's back and grabbed at his ass, pulling him even closer. Max stole a glance down at the floor. It was terra cotta tile, hard and cold, and no doubt it would be hell on his back. He weighed this consideration against the hot, hot prospect of having Joe on top of him right now, making him beg for it. He was pretty sure the irreversible spinal damage would be well worth it.

"Mmm. I like how you're thinking." Joe strung kisses up Max's neck and along his jaw. "But no way is this dinner going to waste." He took a step back. "You want to help me with the salad? There's stuff in the refrigerator. Cutting board's right there."

Max watched with dismay as Joe went back to stirring the stew. His one consolation was that Joe looked as undone as Max felt, his hair even wilder than usual, his chest rising and falling heavily. "You're both a sadist and a masochist, you realize, for making us wait," Max told him as he started in on salad detail.

Joe grinned. "Haven't you ever heard that patience is a virtue?"

Max snorted derisively, and Joe grinned harder.

Joe took some Granny Smiths from a bowl on the counter, cut them up, and started to sauté them. "This dish is supposed to be served over fried apples," he explained.

"Sounds good. Do you have stuff to make dressing?"

Joe pointed. "Top cabinet."

Max found the olive oil and vinegar, whisked it together in a bowl, and lightly dressed the salad. Joe took a crusty loaf of bread from the oven, and they were ready to sit down to dinner.

Max tasted his stew and went absolutely still.

Joe made a concerned face. "Don't like it?"

Max widened his eyes at him. "Are you kidding? This is the best thing I've ever had in my entire life. Where'd you learn how to cook like this?"

Joe shrugged. "Trial and error mostly. If I didn't learn to cook, I wasn't going to eat."

"That's the difference between living in Montana and living in Manhattan. I'm never going to go hungry as long as there's one Chinese restaurant still standing."

Joe laughed. "So, seriously, you've never been to a Giants game?"

"I never have," Max told him. "I mean, the agency does have seats. Sometimes we take clients, but the account team is in charge of that. That's what they're there for, to do all the stuff I don't want to do."

"I'm sure they'd be thrilled to hear that." Joe smiled wryly. "My company has season tickets too. We should go sometime. Not for business, obviously. Since we're compartmentalizing."

Max considered this a moment. On the one hand, there was football. On the other hand, there was Joe. "Could we have hot dogs?" he asked.

Joe smiled. "And beer."

Fortunately for Max, sports were not the only thing that interested Joe. Somehow they got onto the topic of classic science fiction movies, a hobby of Max's.

"I know a lot of people think *Plan Nine from Outer Space* is the worst film ever made, but I tell you, Max, they just don't get Ed Wood's genius."

Max took a moment to process that and then pointed his fork accusingly. "You're a total nerd! You're just in the closet about it."

Joe made a "duh" face at him. "I'm an engineer. The fact that I'm a nerd isn't the best-kept secret in the world."

"Oh, please," Max scoffed. "I'm the king of nerds, and I just now realized you're one of us. No one pays any attention to your dorkiness. They're too busy staring at—" He waved his hand vaguely at Joe's face and body and, well, all of him.

Joe's eyes went bright with amusement. "Are you trying to flatter me?"

Max rolled his eyes. "No. You know perfectly well you're gorgeous."

"You're very forthright, aren't you?" Joe leaned in a little closer. "I like that about you."

Max reached for his wine, unaccountably nervous. He took a swallow and then another. Joe still watched him closely, and Max managed to get out, "I, uh—me too. I mean, I like you."

Joe smiled softly, and Max's cheeks felt ridiculously hot. He could only hope he wasn't actually blushing. He hadn't blushed since he had pimples and a crush on Sonja Burkhardt in sixth period English.

“So,” Joe said, taking a sip of wine. “You were married before.” He gave Max an inquisitive look.

“I was,” Max said dryly. “It was hell on Earth to hear my ex-wife tell the story.”

“You didn’t think so?”

Max’s mouth twisted into a self-deprecating smile. “Apparently, I can be an idiot on rare occasions. Looking back now, I can see things weren’t as good between us as I wanted to believe.” He took a breath, let it out, and added more briskly, “Of course, then I discovered I’m actually gay, and that would have been that for our marriage anyway.”

He waited for the inevitable crack about the timeliness of his conversion, but it didn’t come. “I’m sorry. That must have been hard.” Joe sounded nothing but sincere.

“I, yes, well—” Max cleared his throat. “Have you ever been married?”

Joe shook his head. “Got as close as being engaged, but it didn’t work out.” He ducked his head almost sheepishly. “Valerie decided I was too dull for her.”

Max stared. “Excuse me?”

Joe shrugged. “She was a photographer and wanted to travel. I was set on staying in Wilcox and starting my company. That was boring to her. I was boring for wanting it.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Max insisted, perhaps a trifle loudly. “I’m a communication professional. Trust me when I say that you and the word ‘boring’ do not belong in the same sentence. That’s an insult to you and, and... to language itself!”

Joe smiled crookedly. “Thanks, but I am actually over it by now.”

“Well, I’m not!” Max said hotly.

Joe's smile grew broader. He leaned across the table and kissed Max. "You can be surprisingly sweet, you know that?"

Max's face went instantly hot. "Yes, well," he said, trying not to sound as ridiculously pleased as he felt. "Just don't let it get out."

Joe laughed. "Don't worry, Max. It'll be our little secret."

They finished their dinner and carried their dishes back into the kitchen. Joe left them to soak in the sink. Max helped him put away the leftover food.

Joe lounged casually against the counter, finishing off his wine. "So, what do you want to do now?"

Max stared at him. "Is that a joke?" The words came out flustered. "It's a joke, right?"

Joe laughed and pulled Max in by the arm to kiss him. "Yes, Max, that was a joke."

Max let out his breath in relief. "Oh, thank God." He took Joe's face between his hands and kissed him like he was still hungry. "Come on." He grabbed Joe's hand and pulled him toward the bedroom. "You promised to fuck me. You have a contractual obligation."

Joe wrapped his arm around Max's waist, pressing close against him. Max could feel that he was already hard. He kissed Max's neck, his breath hot against Max's skin. "Hey, I wouldn't want to get a reputation for not living up to my commitments."

In Joe's bedroom, they took off their clothes, watching each other, stopping occasionally to kiss or touch skin as it was revealed. Max was impatient to have Joe naked and against him, but there was none of the anxiety of the first time. He knew exactly what he wanted, and he knew he was going to get it.

Max lay down on the bed, and Joe stretched out next to him. He trailed his fingertips lightly over Max's chest, exploring. "You know, you're pretty gorgeous yourself."

Max made a dubious face. "That's not something I hear a lot."

"Then you haven't been sleeping with the right people," Joe told him.

Max caught Joe's jaw in his hand and kissed him. "I want to go down on you, okay?"

Joe groaned softly in the back of his throat.

"Is that a yes?"

"How many guys do you know who argue against getting their cock sucked?"

Max considered this. "Yeah. Good point." He swiped his tongue at Joe's nipple and then bit down gently.

"Shit!" Joe cursed softly. His hands came up to cup Max's head. His cock got harder against Max's thigh.

"You like that," Max said smugly. He started to kiss down Joe's sternum. "You're going to like this even better."

Joe stroked his hands through Max's hair, rubbing at his scalp. The muscles of his stomach trembled beneath Max's mouth as he kissed his way downward. Max flicked his tongue around the rim of Joe's belly button. Joe shivered and tightened his fingers in Max's hair. Max followed the line of hair on Joe's stomach with his tongue. Joe's cock brushed against his cheek, leaving a wet trail.

"Suck me." Joe's voice was low and rough, and just hearing it made Max hotter for him.

He wrapped his hand around the base of Joe's cock and licked at the head. Max had no experience deficit when it came to giving blowjobs. He dragged his lips across the tip of Joe's cock, blowing hot little puffs of air against it.

Joe twisted his hands in the bedspread. "Tease me, and I'm not going to fuck you," he warned.

This was such obvious bullshit that Max just smirked at him.

“Please?” Joe said, more desperately.

“Well... since you asked so nicely.”

This was also bullshit. Max’s mouth practically watered, he was so eager to go down. Enough with the teasing, he decided. He opened up and took Joe into his mouth. He liked the silky texture of cock, the weight of it on his tongue, the slight ache he got in his jaw from opening up wider, trying to take it deeper. He relaxed his throat and bobbed his head up and down in the same rhythm as his hand.

Joe gasped Max’s name and arched his back. The tendons stood out in his neck. His feet were flat against the mattress, the muscles tensing in his thighs. His eyes were wide, pupils blown, his lips red where he’d bitten them.

God, the way Joe looked—the way Max had *made* him look....

He reached for his own cock and started to jerk himself off.

“Max.” Joe sounded breathless. “So good.”

Max pulled his mouth away from Joe’s cock. “Don’t come yet. You have to fuck me.”

“Not helping,” Joe said through gritted teeth.

Max smiled and swiped his tongue over Joe’s cock one last time. He reached for the bedside drawer where he knew Joe kept the supplies. He pulled a condom out of the box and was about to squeeze some lube into his hand when Joe took the tube from him. “Let me.”

Just the thought of it made Max shiver. Joe smiled broadly and kissed him.

“Yes, yes,” Max huffed, not terribly convincingly. “It’s your turn to be smug now.”

“I promise to make it worth your while.” Joe waggled his eyebrows. He put a hand on Max’s shoulder and turned him over onto his stomach.

He kissed Max’s neck, dragging his lips slowly, teasingly over sensitive skin. Max could hear the pop of the tube being opened and then the slick, fleshy sound of Joe warming the lube between his hands. At the first touch of Joe’s finger against his hole, Max let out an impatient little mewling noise, which he couldn’t even bother to feel embarrassed about.

“You really want this,” Joe said as if it were a revelation.

Max would have thought his eagerness had been perfectly clear from the way he’d been demanding to be fucked ever since he’d shown up at the door, but he spread his legs wider in invitation just in case.

Joe started to finger Max open, pushing in and pulling out in an almost unbearably languid rhythm. He strung kisses up Max’s back, over his shoulder, everywhere he could reach.

“Come on,” Max said. “Two fingers are enough.”

“Hey, I’ve got an obligation here.” Joe’s breath tickled against Max’s ear. “I like to do a job right.”

“Then fuck me!” Max insisted. “That’s what you’re supposed to be doing. Not driving me crazy!”

Joe laughed, and the sensation of it against Max’s back made him shiver. “Almost there. Almost. Touch yourself.” His voice was low, gravelly, and delightfully filthy. Sounding like that was probably illegal in a good dozen states.

Max took a shaky breath, wrapped his hand around his cock, and pushed back against Joe’s fingers. It was good—God, so good—just not quite enough.

“Please!” Max begged, without any shame at all. “Please just fuck me!”

Joe still refused to hurry, because apparently turnabout was fair play, and Joe proved a far bigger tease than Max would ever hope to be. By the time Joe finally pulled his fingers away and rolled on a condom, Max was shaking, breathless, and so desperate that if he had to wait one more second, he was going to lose it completely.

Joe pulled Max up onto his hands and knees, fingers pressing into Max's hips, firm and controlling. Max's cock jerked in anticipation, and he spread his thighs as wide as they would go. Joe entered him without prelude, such an abrupt change from the maddening teasing it took Max's breath away. Joe stilled, letting Max adjust. The burn and the stretch were more familiar now, and Max could feel the pulse in Joe's cock, almost unbearably arousing.

"Do it." Max pushed his hips back against Joe's. "Do me."

Joe tightened his grip on Max, no doubt leaving bruises, and started to move. Just like the last time they'd done this, the knife-edge sensation faded, and Max relaxed a little more. Joe must have felt this, because he started to move faster, harder, drawing breathy moans out of Max with every thrust.

"Max." Joe's voice hitched, the sound of a man just barely hanging onto his control.

"Don't," Max panted. "Don't hold back."

"Jesus," Joe muttered, and then he canted Max's hips up and really started to go at him.

It felt like being turned inside out in the best possible way, Joe's cock dragging against that electric place with every thrust. Max clutched at the bedspread with one hand to keep from sliding, trying to steady himself so he could take more, take as much as he could get. Every stroke of his hand on his own cock was just as rough and frantic as Joe's thrusts. Max never would have guessed that getting fucked senseless would be the biggest turn-on of his life, but there it was. He was impossibly hot all over,

and he could barely breathe. His balls drew up, and there was that telltale tingling at the base of his spine.

“I’m going to—” His eyes flew shut, and he came all over his hand.

“Shit!” Joe’s body stuttered and lurched, his hips pumping, and then he was coming inside Max.

Max slumped on the bed, only distantly aware of Joe pulling out of him, mopping them both up with tissues, moving Max out of the wet spot. He felt as boneless as a rag doll as Joe maneuvered him onto his side and curled up behind him. Max took Joe’s hand and folded it across his chest.

Joe kissed Max’s shoulder and rested his cheek against it. “If you don’t take off in the middle of the night again, I’ll make you coffee in the morning.”

Even with most of the higher reasoning portions of his brain temporarily out of commission, Max could see that getting too comfortable here, making this a *thing* rather than just some really hot inappropriate sex, was a bad, bad, terrible idea. Anyone with any common sense would get up right now, put his pants back on, and go home.

“Coffee’s good,” Max mumbled and promptly fell asleep, Joe’s arm still wrapped tightly around him.

Chapter Six

MAX straggled into the office the next morning, not nearly as bright and early as usual, a large cup of coffee in his hand, an even larger smile on his face. Possibly he was whistling, although he would deny that to his dying day. He nodded to Abby, opened the door to his office, and screeched to a halt.

“What—” he sputtered, rendered nearly speechless, something he was pretty sure had never happened to him in his life.

Abby scrambled up from her desk. “Don’t freak, okay?”

This was hardly a reasonable request when every book, every magazine, every pile of research, every scrap of paper with the beginnings of brilliance scribbled on it had been—dear God!—*organized*. Not one thing was where he’d left it, and as he told anyone who would listen and quite a few people who were desperately trying not to, that wasn’t a mess on his desk. It was a system!

Max could feel the blood pounding in his temples. It was entirely possible he was about to have an aneurysm. “What did I tell you about touching my stuff?”

“Um. Nothing?” Abby said.

Max glared. He found that impossible to believe, and even if he had somehow omitted to make his intentions clear, it should have been perfectly apparent. System!

“Can I tell you what I did?” Abby asked, making a reasonable face at him.

As far as Max was concerned, expecting him to be reasonable when someone had touched his stuff (*his stuff!*) was the most unreasonable thing of all. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Do it quickly before I call security and have you dragged from the building."

"Well, first of all, your magazines are in binders now, grouped by why you're interested in them, with the most looked at, based on wear and greasy fingerprints, at the front, all conveniently tabbed, with labels on the spines."

"You couldn't possibly know why I was interested in a particular magazine."

Abby waved her hand at the bookcase, inviting him to take a look. He humored her, because proving her wrong would be some small consolation. He pulled out a binder, flipping through it desultorily.

Abby craned her neck to look at the pages. "Oh, yeah. That one's things that shouldn't work, but do."

Max flipped past an ad for Icelandic vodka that actually had a walrus in it, then flipped back to it. *Things that shouldn't work, but do*. That was exactly why he'd hung on to this.

He stared at her. "How did you—"

Abby shrugged. "I just went on instinct."

"Show me the rest of it," he told her.

She took him through the system she'd set up for his research materials, pointed out the corkboard Max had ignored ever since he'd had this office, where his scraps of brilliance were now prominently displayed so he could more easily mull them over.

"So?" Abby prompted. "What do you think?"

Max took a moment. "I suppose you're not fired after all," he said begrudgingly.

Abby rolled her eyes. "You're welcome."

"Yes, yes, congratulations. Occasionally you prove useful." Max made shooing hands at her. "Go do it some more."

"Sure thing, Mr. Tomlin." She grinned and started to go, but then turned back. "Oh, that reminds me. A Ms. Hoffman came by earlier, and she seemed kind of surprised I was working for you. She said you should call her."

"Oh, uh, yes, yes, I'll get right on that," Max lied.

Abby nodded and headed off to her desk. Max settled into his chair and sipped at his coffee, calculating strategies for avoiding Kate. No doubt she'd have all kinds of complaints about Max hiring his own help, getting worked up about niggling little details like references and social security numbers and W-2 forms. Of course, there was the small matter of how Abby would be paid. If Max didn't go through Kate, she wouldn't get onto the payroll. He mulled this over for a moment or two, and then it occurred to him that he could just write her a check himself and expense it. He owned the company. He could do that kind of thing.

Satisfied, he settled down to work.

His peace and quiet lasted for all of ten seconds, and then Sanderson came barging in. "Tell me we're making progress," she demanded, thumping down onto the corner of his desk.

He scowled at her. "What part of 'I don't want your behind on my belongings' do you not understand?"

Sanderson smiled sweetly, a sure sign she was contemplating ways to poison him. "What part of 'we've only got a week and a half before this pitch' are you stumbling over?"

"We're not there yet, but it's coming along, okay?" he said huffily. "We *will* have truly exceptional work to show at the presentation. We *will* win this account. Or my team *will* die trying. Happy now?"

“Ecstatic.” Sanderson slid off his desk. “When you’re threatening to work your team to death, I know all’s well in Tomlin-ville.” She smirked at him, flipped her hair, and sauntered out of his office.

Max made a face at the empty air where she’d just been standing. He reached for his phone to intercom Abby and tell her he wasn’t to be disturbed, but she beat him to the punch.

“Yeah, sorry to bug you,” she said before Max could snap at her. “But there’s a woman on the phone who says she’s your ex-wife, and that you shouldn’t just have me tell her you’re in a meeting because, and I’m quoting here, ‘Someone who’s an advertising legend in his own mind shouldn’t be afraid of a little healthy competition.’” Abby took a big breath. “Should I put her through? Or do you want me to make up a better excuse? Like... you were playing in the office softball tournament and you took a comebacker to the face, and now your jaw is wired shut, and you’re not allowed to talk for six months? Um. Or something?”

For a moment, he seriously considered the broken jaw excuse. Then he sighed heavily. “She’ll be insufferable if I don’t take her call. Also, she’ll never believe I voluntarily took part in a sporting event.”

“Okay, Mr. Tomlin. Here she comes.”

There was a blare of truly awful music as Abby transferred the call, and then Max had Christine’s voice in his ear. “I’m surprised. I really thought you’d have your assistant make up some feeble excuse about how you stepped on a rusty nail and have lockjaw and can’t talk until the antibiotics kick in.”

“And miss this scintillating conversation?” Max said sarcastically.

“I just wanted to let you know how our work for the Avionics pitch is coming along,” Christine said brightly, ignoring Max’s barb. “Call it a professional courtesy. Anyway, we’ve got some great ideas that we’re really excited about. We feel very good about

our prospects. Bill has been making an invaluable contribution, by the way.”

Max snorted. “Doing what? Fetching coffee?”

“I’m going to remind you that you said that when we’ve won the business.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Of all the things Max worried about (and he was certifiably neurotic), being bested at advertising by Mr. Plastic didn’t make the list. “I’m shaking in my eight-hundred-dollar Italian loafers.”

“We’ll see, Tomlin. We’ll see,” Christine said, and she hung up.

“Yes, we will,” Max answered, even though Christine wasn’t listening.

He hunkered back down at his desk. Christine’s taunting just made him all the more determined to wipe the floor with Hunter & Campbell in this pitch. He managed all of five minutes’ worth of concentration before Judith popped her head into his office to ask, “So, how’s it going?”

Max threw up his hands in exasperation. “What is this? A conspiracy? How am I supposed to get any work done when I’m constantly being interrupted?”

“Yes, yes, I know, Max. You’re very put upon,” Judith said. “But I’d appreciate it if you’d humor me.”

He let out his breath. “Fine. We’re making headway. Not as fast as I’d like, of course. I’ve already warned the team that if they don’t come up with something dazzling soon they’re all fired.”

“Yes,” Judith said dryly. “Because everyone takes you so seriously when you threaten to fire them a good dozen times a day.”

“It could happen!” Max insisted. Her dubiousness offended the pride he took in being a son of a bitch to work for.

“But that isn’t actually what I was asking about,” Judith said.

Max frowned. “It wasn’t?” Then he realized what she meant, and his nostrils flared. “Are you telling me you came here to pry into the details of my sex life?”

“Yes.” Judith plunked down onto one of the chairs facing Max’s desk, looking interested.

Max puffed up indignantly. “That’s private!”

“Not when you’re sleeping with a prospective client.”

Max scowled at her. “I’m not sleeping with him to get the business. And there’s nothing going on between us that will get in the way of the pitch. That’s all you need to know.”

Judith gave him an odd look. “And you’re not tempted in the least to boast about your conquest? The way you usually do, I mean. Bennett is a very attractive man.”

“What part of ‘private’ do you not understand?” Max snapped at her. “Also, if you’ve been having sexual fantasies about him, you can seriously stop that now.”

“Huh,” Judith said, and she got to her feet.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Max demanded.

Judith just smiled like she knew a secret Max didn’t and left his office.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he shouted after her, but he got no answer.

Max picked up the nearest thing to hand and threw it at the door; it was a book, thankfully not one of his favorites. Damn Judith and her know-it-all smile. That would drive him crazy for the rest of the day.

He did his best to fight off the distraction and had barely managed to get underway again when it was time to leave for his

session with Dr. Tanner. He sighed heavily, retrieved his coat, and trudged off.

There were times when Max wondered if perhaps therapy caused more problems than it actually solved. The moment he boarded the elevator in Dr. Tanner's building, his feckless good humor over the previous night with Joe began to fade. By the time he stepped through the door into Dr. Tanner's waiting room, various neuroses were battling it out in his head. He was going to screw up the pitch. He was going to wreck the thing with Joe. What was he doing even considering a relationship with someone who spent the vast majority of his time in *Montana* anyway? This was another heartbreak waiting to happen.

He slumped onto the sofa when Dr. Tanner showed him into the office, draping his arm across his eyes.

"I have no willpower," he told her balefully.

"That's never been my impression, Max. What makes you say so?"

"You know how I told you I made a decision? That the thing with Joe was a big mistake, and I wasn't going to sleep with him anymore? I was going to concentrate on winning the business and saving his company?"

"The emergency 2:00 a.m. call," she said evenly. "Yes, I remember it well."

"I had the hottest sex of my life with him last night!" Max blurted out. "I went to his place and threw myself at him and begged him to fuck me." He groaned aloud. "And it gets even worse! He made me dinner. And he's a really good cook. And he wants to take me to a football game, not to schmooze, just to... I don't know. Because he wants to spend time with me or something."

"And this is a problem because—?"

"I have some kind of impulse control disorder. Obviously."

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Or maybe a hidden masochistic streak that’s just now coming out, and I’m trying to sabotage myself. Judith will push me off the roof if I mess up this pitch.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Or, hey, I could have hallucinated the whole thing. Well, not the sex, because I still feel—” He cleared his throat. “But the rest of it! The fact that he made me coffee and let me have the business section first and the way he said my name when we kissed goodbye, all, all, fond! And bedroomy! I could be totally delusional!”

Dr. Tanner said “mmm-hmm” yet again, in the same stridently neutral tone as before, which Max felt certain translated: *You couldn’t be more wrong if you tried.*

“So, what then? What’s the matter with me?” He drew in a sharp breath. “Do you think I need an intervention?”

“No,” Dr. Tanner said. “You just need to stop playing armchair psychiatrist.”

He scowled at her. “Then what does it mean? Why do I keep going back, even after I’ve made a big declaration about not sleeping with him and I look like an idiot when I’m pleading with him to fuck me?”

Dr. Tanner shrugged. “I think it means you like this man.”

“Oh, great.” Max could feel panic rising like floodwater. “That’s just great!”

“What’s wrong with being happy with someone?” Dr. Tanner asked.

“*Happy?*” Max said direly, like a man condemned.

He’d tried being happy before. Hell, he’d thought he *was* happy, and Christine too. And look where that had gotten him.

Frankly, he was pretty sure a certified psychiatric disorder would be easier to deal with than the delusion of bliss.

"I grant that the circumstances may be a bit awkward," Dr. Tanner said, "mixing business and a budding personal relationship. But life isn't neat, and new opportunities come along when they come along. Maybe you do want to consider postponing the romantic involvement until the business is concluded. Or perhaps you should let someone else at your company take the lead on the account."

"Those morons?" Max huffed. "I wouldn't trust them to—"

Dr. Tanner held up her hand. "I'm sure you can work it out in a way you're comfortable with. What I wouldn't like to see happen is that you talk yourself out of being interested in this man. It's the most excited I've seen you about someone in a long time. You shouldn't cut yourself off from something that could be good for you just because you're afraid."

"Afraid?" Max said indignantly. "I'm *Max Tomlin*. I eat fear for breakfast. I practically invented—"

But now that the idea of happily-ever-after with Joe was rattling around in his head, he had to face the fact that he was rather terrified. His heart started to pound in his chest, a galloping, panicky rhythm, and he couldn't quite catch his breath. He felt light-headed too, and oh God, was this an anxiety attack he was having?

He put his head between his knees. "Oh God, oh God, oh God."

"Just try to calm down," Dr. Tanner said, in the kind of voice people used with skittish cats.

"I didn't expect it to be like this when I went gay!" Max said. "I thought I was signing on for some empty sex and it would all be completely causal. I didn't know it would really matter! I didn't actually expect to—"

Dr. Tanner lifted an eyebrow. "Be gay?"

He let out a sigh and sat back up, sinking against the cushions in defeat. "Now what am I supposed to do?"

"What do you want to do?"

Max scowled at her. "Do they teach you that answering-a-question-with-a-question thing in therapy school? Are you *trying* to drive me out of my mind? Because let me tell you, you're succeeding."

Dr. Tanner didn't reply. She just waited, the faintest hint of a smile on her lips, as if to say, *I haven't fallen for evasion tactics this lame since my first day on the job*. She really did know him too well. Perhaps seeing the same therapist for the past decade had been a strategic mistake.

Max mulishly stayed silent, and Dr. Tanner sat there serenely, as if the awkward quiet didn't bother her in the least. The standoff felt as if it lasted the better part of a century, although it was probably closer to three seconds before Max buckled.

He threw his hands up into the air. "Fine! I want it all, okay? I want to win the business and save Joe's company, and I want to go to bed with him and wake up with him in the morning and have him make me coffee, although we do need to discuss how he grinds his beans, because I don't think the way he's doing it is fully nurturing their flavor."

"Then I'm sure that's exactly what you'll do." Dr. Tanner smiled at him. "I've never had any doubt about the power of your will, Max."

Max ducked his head. It felt like being given a gold star by his teacher, and that embarrassed him on so many levels.

"Our, uh, our time's up right?" he said hopefully. "Please tell me our time's up."

Dr. Tanner smiled again. Twice in one day. That set a record. "I'll see you next time."

He got to his feet in relief and made a break for the door.

"Max," Dr. Tanner called to him.

He let out his breath and turned back around.

"Just because it didn't work out with Christine doesn't mean it won't work out with anyone else. I want you to remember that."

"I'll, uh—I'll try." It was the best Max could promise.

In the cab ride back to the office, he pulled out his phone. Now that he was trying to be brave about this whole happiness business, he wanted to talk to Joe, hear his voice, make a plan to see him. But the driver kept glancing at him in the rearview mirror every other second, watching Max with slit-eyed vigilance, as if he were afraid Max was going to try to steal the extremely smelly cardboard pine tree bobbing in the back window. Max tucked his phone into his pocket. He'd wait and call when he got to the office and had more privacy.

The moment he darkened the door of Tomlin Foster, however, he was waylaid by Sanderson.

"The Yamaguchi Electronics clients are in the conference room." She grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him. "I told you about this last week. Where the hell have you been?"

Max dug in his heels. "I have other things to do! I need to make a very important phone call!"

"Oh, don't even think about it." She gave him one last shove, pushing him through the door into the conference room, where a dozen Japanese men sat smiling expectantly.

Max plastered on an answering smile and said under his breath to Sanderson, "I hate you even more than usual right now."

The meeting lumbered on forever, and Max glared daggers at Sanderson to make it clear he didn't appreciate this gross abuse of

his time and patience. Finally, *finally*, everyone finished yammering on, and after several confusing rounds of handshakes and half bows, Max liberated himself. He hurried back to his office and stopped at Abby's desk to pick up his messages. He was disappointed to find there'd been no word from Joe. Not that it meant anything, of course. He was just being pessimistic. Then again, it would be just his luck to decide to be happy right as it all started to go wrong.

This thought made him all the more desperate to talk to Joe and reassure himself that everything was okay.

"Oh, Mr. Tomlin, you should know—" Abby began.

Max waved her off impatiently, opened his door, and found an office-full of people staring back at him.

"—that the Avionics team is here for your six o'clock status meeting," Abby finished.

Max let out a put-upon sigh. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of telling them to come back in ten minutes. If it had been any other account, he would have.

"All right," he said, closing the door and settling at his desk. "What do we have?"

Quinn reviewed his latest stab at developing a strategy. Isabel discussed her ideas for the campaign's look and feel. Jason threw out some rough headlines.

Max listened in a state of fitful impatience. "Yes, yes, not bad, just not quite *there* yet," he said to everything.

He pulled back the cuff of his shirt to look at his watch, trying to be discreet, or at least as discreet as someone with his personality type could manage. Not even an entire minute had passed since the last time he'd checked. When he glanced back up, everyone in the room was staring at him.

"I haven't got all day!" he blustered. "Things to do, places to go. I can't sit around babysitting you while you attempt, so far not terribly successfully, to do the jobs you've been hired for."

"Tomlin's getting some," Jason said with an insufferable smirk.

Max sputtered. "I—" He started to deny it, just on general principle, because it was no one's business. And really, what was wrong with everyone lately? But then a picture flashed through his head, of him and Joe and the impossibly hot sex they'd had last night. Max's breath caught, and trying to deny anything became entirely pointless.

"So what if I am?" he said irritably. "I'm a consenting adult."

"Whoever he is, he must be a real babe," Jason said, mouth turning up at the corners, "or you wouldn't be in such a hurry to get out of here."

Max pointed his finger at the door. "Go write something brilliant, or you're fired."

Jason just laughed and ambled off as if he didn't have a care in the world. The rest of the team followed him out, still talking over ideas. No one looked as if they'd had the fear of Max Tomlin put into them.

"Huh," Max said to himself.

Maybe Judith had a point, after all.

Max consoled himself that at least they were gone. He quickly pulled out his phone and hit speed dial number one, a position that had been unoccupied since his breakup with Christine. His longest relationship in all that time had been with Marco, and he'd never made it past number eight, just before Max's dry cleaners, but after the supplier where he got his Kopi Luwak coffee.

"Hey," Joe answered on the second ring. "How's the brilliant Max Tomlin today?" There was a smile in his voice.

“Filled with genius, as always,” Max said cheerfully. “How are things going there?”

“Well, I haven’t spent all day fighting off Omnion and their lawyers from hell. So, you know, pretty good,” Joe said dryly.

“I’ll do my best to take your mind off it tonight.” Max let his voice drop down into the octave of dirty promises.

“Um—”

“First, though, I thought we could try that little place over on Bleecker I was telling you about. Or are you not in the mood for sushi?”

“Max, I’m sorry. I’ve been tied up all day, and I meant to call you sooner. I can’t make it tonight. I’ve got this work thing, and I’m not sure how late it’ll go.”

“Oh,” Max said, trying not to let his disappointment come through, and failing miserably.

“I’ll make it up to you tomorrow,” Joe said quickly, sounding apologetic. “We can get sushi. We can do anything you want.” Max could hear voices in the background, as if he’d caught Joe in a meeting. “Sorry. I’ve got to go.”

The phone went dead in Max’s ear, and a creeping sense of panic started to take him over. *This is what happens when you decide you’re happy*, a shrill voice insisted in his head. Probably there wasn’t even any work thing. Joe had just gotten tired of him already. Maybe he was seeing some other man, someone younger and less acerbic and more likely to spend time on the treadmill. Or maybe it was a woman he was sneaking around with. Joe *was* bisexual, and being involved with a woman had to make life in Montana a lot less complicated.

Max’s panic ratcheted up another notch, and he wondered if anyone in the office had a paper bag on hand in case he started to hyperventilate.

"I've got those Gartner Group reports you wanted." Abby stopped in her tracks. "Mr. Tomlin? Are you all right?"

"I'm—" How was he supposed to finish that sentence? *Strangely heartbroken over someone I expected to detest on sight* wasn't something he felt like sharing with his assistant. Or anyone else, for that matter.

"Is there anything I can do?" Abby asked, concerned.

Max shook his head mechanically. "No, no, I'll be—" Then an idea occurred to him. "Well, maybe there is something."

Abby laid the reports on Max's desk and sat down, her ready-to-help expression on. "Shoot."

"It involves just," Max pinched his thumb and forefinger together with only a sliver of daylight showing, "a teeny tiny bit of lying."

Abby grinned. "Oh, so it's something *fun* then."

"I need you to call up the assistant of this prospective client." Max cleared his throat. "And find out where he's having dinner."

"Is that all?" Abby rolled her eyes. "From the way you were freaking out, I thought it was going to be, like, something complicated. Give me the number."

Max pushed Joe's card at her. She picked up the phone and dialed, drumming her fingers on Max's desk while she waited for Joe's assistant to answer.

"Oh, great! I'm so glad you're still there. This is Abby Donald calling for Max Tomlin. I just got a frantic message from him. He misplaced the information about the dinner he has with Mr. Bennett tonight, and he totally can't remember where and when they were supposed to meet. For a genius, the man has a mind like a sieve."

Abby smiled at Max, enjoying herself entirely too much in his opinion.

She laughed into the phone. "Well, I'm glad to hear I'm not the only one with a forgetful boss." She reached for a notepad and jotted something down. "Wonderful. He'll be so relieved when I call him back. Thanks for your help!" She hung up.

Max made an impatient face at her.

"Okay, so he's having dinner at La Trafalla at 8:30. Here's the address if you need it." She handed over the piece of paper and hesitated. "But his assistant said he's supposed to be meeting someone called Iara of the Horizon agency? I don't know if it means anything to you."

Max's expression froze. "Oh. Yes. Of course. Well. Thank you." He cleared his throat. "That's, uh, it for today. You can go."

"Okay, Mr. Tomlin." Abby bounced up from her chair. "Have a good night."

Her exuberance made Max feel tired on a good day. When he'd just found out his... okay, maybe not boyfriend, but *his*, still, sort of, in some way... was not only cheating on him, but on his agency too, it just depressed the hell out of him. Who was this Iara anyway? Max had never heard of her, and he knew everyone in the business.

Research, research, research. That mantra had made Max the success he was today, and instinct screamed at him to find out everything he could about this woman. There was only one go-to person for research as far as Max was concerned.

"Tell me everything you know about Horizon and some floozy named Iara. I don't know her last name," Max demanded as he charged into Quinn's office.

Quinn, who had been deep in thought over his laptop, nearly went flying off his chair. "Jesus, Max!" He clutched at his chest. "Have you ever heard of knocking?" He rolled his eyes. "Of course you haven't. Why do I even bother wasting my breath? As for Iara,

she doesn't have a last name. Not one she goes by anyway. And what does she have to do with anything anyway?"

"She's having dinner with Bennett!" Max waved his hands wildly.

"Huh," Quinn said, sounding more interested than outraged, which was just *wrong*. "That must mean Horizon is in on the hunt. A creative boutique. Not strong on strategy. I wonder if that's what Avionics is looking for?"

"Who has only one name these days?" Max interrupted, because if Quinn got going on one of his Machiavellian strategic musings, they'd be there all night, and Max had a not-quite-boyfriend to fight for. "That one name thing is so mid-nineties. She must be an idiot."

Quinn shrugged. "Maybe it's, you know, a cultural thing. She's Brazilian. As for being an idiot, I don't think so. She's come up with some good campaigns. The funny ones for that kid's cereal that turns the milk purple and those noir-looking perfume ads. Also, I've heard she's really hot."

Max could feel himself turning red. "Traitor!" he yelled.

He stormed out, leaving a bewildered Quinn staring after him.

Chapter Seven

MAX TOMLIN was not a man built for stealth. Frankly, he specialized more in making grand entrances, throwing fits, and delivering opinions in a voice that was a decibel or three too loud. Skulking around did not become a man of genius, or so he had always felt. At the same time, one of the first things you learned in the advertising business was that you had to do what you had to do. So skulking it was.

He timed his arrival at La Trafalla precisely at 8:45 in order to give Joe and that man-stealer Iara time to get settled. That way, Max could sneak in, take a table where he wouldn't be noticed, and keep an eye on them.

The maître d', Raoul, nearly foiled the plan by calling out in a booming voice, "Mr. Tomlin, how nice to see you!"

With the amount of money Max spent in the place, Raoul should be ecstatic to see him, quite frankly.

Max put his finger to his lips. "Shh! I'm undercover. I need your help."

Raoul looked confused, but apparently this wasn't the first time a patron had come to him with an unusual request. He asked gamely, "What can I do for you, Mr. Tomlin?"

Max craned his neck, peering into the dining room, and caught sight of Joe and a woman he presumed to be Iara seated by the windows. He shrank back, hiding behind Raoul before Joe could spot him. "I need an out-of-the-way table, somewhere I can be inconspicuous," he said. "Where I can keep an eye on them." He pointed discreetly.

Raoul nodded and picked up a menu. "Of course, Mr. Tomlin. Right this way."

He set off, taking a route straight through the middle of the dining room floor, expecting Max to follow.

"Raoul!" Max hissed at him. "What part of 'inconspicuous' do you not understand?"

Raoul stopped, glancing back at Max. "Sorry, sorry, Mr. Tomlin. I'm just so used to giving you a good table." He made a detour, leading Max over to an isolated corner. "Will this do?"

Max checked the line of sight. He had a clear view of Joe and Iara.

"Yes, thank you," Max said, taking a seat.

Raoul handed him a menu. "*Buon appetito.*"

Max tried to get comfortable, but he was jammed into a tiny little nook, hemmed in on one side by a decorative column and on the other by a large potted palm. He had to fight off the sense of insulted dignity. *Priorities*, he reminded himself.

A waiter circled around, and Max ordered a large, large, really he wanted it large, Scotch straight up. That left him free to peruse the scene at Joe's table. From this angle, he could only see Iara in profile, but that confirmed his worst fears. Iara was, to borrow Quinn's term, hot. She was slender, with delicate features and softly curling honey-colored hair that tumbled down her back. Her casually impeccable posture made Max instinctively suck in his gut and sit up straighter.

Iara said something, and Joe smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. They looked like a couple. An incredibly attractive couple. Max could only imagine what people must have thought when he and Joe had been out together: *What is that hot guy doing with that guy with the love handle situation?* He took another big gulp of his Scotch.

The waiter rematerialized at Max's table. "May I take your order?"

Max handed him the menu. "Just keep the Scotch coming."

Over at the other table, Iara showered Joe with soft smiles, batting her eyes at every opportunity, taking slow, lingering bites of her dinner. The woman made eating veal piccata look dirtier than some actual porn Max had seen. Joe wasn't flirting back *per se*, but then again, he wasn't exactly looking away with a scandalized expression, either. Heartache began to shift to anger, and Max glared darkly over at their table. He truly regretted he couldn't slap both of them senseless with the power of his mind.

He waited for them to finish, which took three times as long as *forever*. After they'd gotten up to go, he hurriedly paid his bill and scrambled after them. Apparently he was a masochist, because he felt compelled to see whether they headed back to Joe's together. For all Max knew, Bennett was sleeping with someone at every agency competing for his business. Maybe he just did things like this. Maybe it was a pathology of some sort, with its own entry in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Max would have to ask Dr. Tanner about it.

The restaurant had a set of two doors at the entrance. Max stopped in the small area between them, peering out at Joe and Iara, who lingered on the sidewalk, still talking. Max checked his watch and puffed an impatient sigh. What were they doing? Negotiating sexual positions? At last, Joe stepped to the curb and flagged down a cab. Max's stomach churned unhappily. This was it. They were going to get in that taxi and drive off together.

Joe held the door open, and Iara stepped toward the cab. She leaned in to kiss Joe's cheek before sliding into the car. Max had always found the term "eaten up with jealousy" to be a terrible cliché, but he had to rethink that opinion now. There was definitely a hollow, angry place in his belly that hadn't been there before.

But then, the cab drove off—without Joe—and okay, that wasn't what Max had been expecting. Still, he had spent the last three hours watching Joe play footsie with... well, someone who wasn't him. Totally unacceptable!

He pushed the door open and strode outside. "*This* is the important business you blew me off for?"

Joe stood there blinking owlishly in surprise, which would have been comical if Max were a little less furious. "What are you doing here?" Joe managed at last.

"Watching you cheat on me, apparently!" Max's voice rose angrily.

"Cheat?" Joe blinked some more. "What are you talking about?"

"You and that, that—" Max sputtered, unable to come up with a word bad enough to describe the inappropriate-relationship-wrecker. Even language was failing him now. "She's just using you. She only wants in your pants so she can win the business."

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. "And that has nothing to do with why you're sleeping with me?"

Max's mouth fell open. "No! It doesn't! I have problems defining appropriate boundaries! I can give you the number of my therapist if you don't believe me."

Joe's expression softened. "Max, this isn't what you—"

"I'd ask you what she has that I don't, but I haven't gone suddenly blind," he said sourly.

"Max." Joe took him by the shoulders. "This was just business. I met with Iara the way I've met with the heads of all the other agencies. She's been out of town, so this was the first chance we've had to get together. That's it. Nothing else is going on."

"She was flirting with you! She kissed you!"

"She's Brazilian!" Joe said, exasperated.

"So I'm the only one you're having inappropriate sex with?" Max asked skeptically.

Joe let out his breath and put his hands on Max's waist. "You're the only one. I give you my word on that."

From most other people, this would have elicited a snort of disbelief, but from Joe....

"Good," Max declared with satisfaction. "I plan to keep it that way." He yanked Joe against him and laid a hard, greedy kiss on his mouth. Joe's breath hitched, and Max could feel Joe's body responding. Hmm. It seemed Joe had a thing for slightly demented displays of possessiveness. That could come in rather handy.

"I'm going to take you home with me, and I'm going to fuck you until you don't know your name," Max told him. "Any objections?"

Joe's eyes went wide, his expression like a man who'd been struck by lightning. Max took that to mean "no." He flagged down a cab and manhandled Joe into it. Twenty minutes later, he had Joe in bed, naked, with his legs over Max's shoulders, breathlessly begging.

Max gripped Joe's hips and moved inside him. Joe was hot and tight, and with every thrust, Max had to bite back a desperate groan.

Joe thrashed his head on the pillow and chanted brokenly, "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me."

"Oh, God," Max moaned, jerking his hips more sharply.

By the time they collapsed onto the sheets in a sweaty, post-orgasmic heap, Max, at least, was a little fuzzy on his own name.

In the morning, Max made coffee and pulled out croissants, and they sat side by side at the kitchen island, reading the morning papers, the *Times* for Max, the *Wall Street Journal* for Joe.

"You know, I'm really not that casual a guy," Joe said out of the blue in between slathering strawberry jam on his pastry and turning the page of the Technology section.

"Um, okay?" Max said over the rim of his mug.

"What I'm trying to say is—" Joe put down the paper and looked Max squarely in the eye. "I don't take this, *us*, lightly. I really wouldn't be sleeping with someone who's competing for my company's business if this didn't have the chance to be something."

"Oh." Max swallowed and then realized a declaration of intent of his own was probably in order. "Me too! It's not just—" He waved his hand. "It's definitely *something*." He sighed inwardly. Becoming gay had not made him any better at these kinds of conversations.

"Good," Joe said with satisfaction. "I just didn't want you to think I had something going with somebody at every agency pitching for our business."

"I didn't!" Max huffed, not entirely convincingly.

Joe cracked a grin. "Uh-huh."

Max put his hands on his hips. "Well, what was I supposed to think with that floozy Iara hanging all over you?"

Joe's grin went wider.

"Oh, very nice! That's just—"

Max's complaint was short-circuited by Joe pulling him in by his tie and planting a long, wet, utterly mind-melting kiss on him. When Joe finally released him, all Max could do for several long moments was blink in a daze.

"Huh," he said at last.

Joe kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad we understand each other."

Chapter Eight

MAX'S favorite point in any project was when the basics of strategy had more or less been ironed out, and the creative foot race began. Two weeks into their work, they'd finally arrived at that stage. Max and Jason had been dueling headlines half the morning. Quinn and Isabel sat watching, swiveling their heads back and forth, following the whole thing like a tennis match.

"Well," Max said at last, somewhat grudgingly. "I suppose there is a reason I hired you in the first place." This was the closest he would ever come to admitting that Jason had beaten him.

Isabel tried to hide a smile. Jason had no such compunction.

Max scowled at them both. "Go! I want new layouts with the new copy, and I want it," he checked his watch, "yesterday."

They headed off to make it happen, although personally, Max would have liked to see them scurry. He fondly remembered the days when people tripped over their own feet in their haste to do his bidding. He sighed. This was what he got for hiring a Zen master and a Titan as his top creative team.

Quinn loitered by Max's desk. "Have you even read the deck yet? The pitch is a week away. I need your input if I'm going to—"

"I'm working on it," Max said impatiently. "Just like I was the last three thousand times you asked me about it."

"Oh, very nice, Max!" Quinn's face started to turn red. "You know, it wasn't my idea to be part of this pitch. I was *trying* to be retired. But no! You had to hector me into coming back. *I can't do it without you, Quinn. I need the Strategy Doctor on this one,*

Quinn.” He adopted a mocking tone that sounded nothing like Max at all. “And now when I need a little help from you to do my job—”

“Okay, okay!” Max threw his hands up. “I’ll do it right now. Jesus, you’re a prima donna.”

Quinn snorted. “Well, you’d know all about that.”

Max narrowed his eyes.

“Get me those comments this morning,” Quinn said, ignoring Max’s glare.

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Don’t have an aneurysm about it.”

Quinn pointed a finger at him. “If I do, it’s all your fault.” He stomped off.

Max yelled after him, “You know you love this!”

He fished the strategy deck out of the stack of pitch materials on his desk and hunkered down with it. Quinn wasn’t the only one with frayed nerves. Tension had a way of setting in when the presentation was only a week away. Max glanced up at their work up on the corkboard. He felt sure they were on the right track. There was just something... something. He’d figure it out eventually. Hopefully.

No, no, he lectured himself. Of course he’d figure it out. He always did. He was Max Tomlin! Since when did he indulge in fits of self-doubt? Of course, he knew the answer to that question. Since his prospective client had become his boyfriend.

Just that morning, he and Joe had been shaving in the bathroom together.

“So, how’s it going?” Joe asked, as he did sometimes.

“Fine, fine, coming along,” Max said vaguely.

Usually this was the end of it. Today, though, Joe met Max’s gaze in the mirror. “This is my life’s work on the line here,” he said quietly.

What he didn't say was, *I need you to come through for me*. But then, he didn't need to say it. Max heard him loud and clear.

He pulled the strategy deck closer and read with renewed focus.

"Mr. Tomlin, can I interrupt just a sec?" Abby hesitated in the doorway.

"Not now," he told her.

"I'm really sorry to bother you, but accounting has called three times this morning. They need all the outstanding production estimates and your expenses and the manpower reports for the creative department. I'd take care of it, but I don't have the authorization on the network."

He scribbled out all his passwords on a piece of paper and pushed it at her without looking up from his work. "Just—" He waved her away.

"Of course, Mr. Tomlin. I'll take care of it right now."

She left, and mercifully, no one else bothered him for the rest of the morning. After making a coffee run, though, he returned to find another needling message from Christine on his voicemail. He let out his breath, counted to ten, and still the impulse to call her back to gloat about all the progress they'd been making got the better of him.

Christine, as always, managed to blindside him. "So I hear you're sleeping with Joe Bennett," she said as soon as she picked up the phone.

"I—" Max sputtered. "I'm—" No one could render him speechless quite the way his ex-wife could.

"Don't even bother, Max," she told him. "I always know when you're lying. Your indignation ratchets up a notch and takes on a certain squeaky tone."

"It does not! I have never sounded 'squeaky' in my life," he said disdainfully.

"But you are sleeping with Bennett," she countered.

"So what?" he snapped at her. "It's none of your business. And how do you know about it anyway?"

"Everybody knows," Christine said flatly. "It's a small town."

"It's New York City!"

"And it sure as hell is my business," Christine said, "if you're trying to sleep your way into the account."

"It has nothing to do with that!" Max insisted.

"Then what? Are you just doing it to get back at me? Because I'm getting married?"

Max sat there for a moment, letting that little piece of narcissism sink in. "Not everything is about you, princess," he said very calmly. "You're always telling me to get over you. Well, you know what? I am."

He hung up, and the kicker was he hadn't even been lying.

Max had no time to savor this revelation before the phone rang again. He snatched it up, ready to remind Abby that a genius needed more than five seconds of peace if he was expected to pour forth his brilliance.

"It's Mr. Bennett," she said, pre-empting his rant. "I figured you'd want to speak with him."

There was a pause, and Max liked to imagine her nervously biting her lip, even if the actual likelihood of it wasn't that great.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Put him through."

A second of truly scarring hold music blared in his ear, and then Joe said, "Hey, how's it going?"

Max frowned. "Why do you sound so awful? What's happened?"

Joe let out his breath. “Nothing. Just Omnion was back here today with their lawyers in tow again, all three dozen of them. It’s getting old, you know?”

Max nodded. “Let me cheer you up. Have lunch with me.”

“I really shouldn’t,” Joe said, but he hesitated long enough to suggest he could be talked in to it.

“We can make it quick,” Max told him. “Union Square. One o’clock. I’ll buy you a hot dog.”

“With extra sauerkraut?”

Max made a face. “If you can choke it down.”

Joe laughed. “How could I turn down an invitation like that? See you at one.”

Max hung up and went back to Quinn’s strategy document. He turned the page, and suddenly he had a jolt of electricity running down his spine, the way that always happened when he got a flash of brilliance. He picked up the phone.

“Okay, just for the record, this time you called me,” Abby said.

“Get in here!” he blustered at her.

She came hustling in, notepad in hand, and plunked down on the chair in front of his desk. “What’s up, Mr. Tomlin?”

“I need you to track down something for me. It’s extremely important. And I need it,” he checked his watch, “in less than an hour.”

He explained the quest.

Abby nodded, taking careful notes. “Okay,” she said, getting to her feet. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Failure is not an option!” Max yelled after her. “This is your job on the line here!”

He tried to go back to reading the strategy document, but mostly he just watched the clock. Three minutes before he needed to leave for his lunch with Joe, Abby finally straggled back into his office.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. Then he noticed her hands were empty and began to sputter. "Oh my God, what are you trying to do to me? Was I not using English when I explained how important this is? Did I fail to mention *firing* is an option here?"

"Relax." Abby rooted around in her enormous purse. "Here." She handed over a bag with a wrapped box inside. "I hope he likes it." She winked.

Max glared, but that just made her smile go wider.

Downstairs, he grabbed a cab and had the driver let him off at the south side of the park. He looked around and spotted Joe sitting on the steps, coat off, enjoying the sudden balmy turn the weather had taken. Joe smiled at him as he approached, and Max bent down to kiss him.

"So, is there anything else you want on your hot dog besides fermented cabbage?"

Joe's mouth turned up at the corners. "Mustard."

"At least you're not totally weird," Max said with mock relief. He kissed Joe again. "Be right back."

He waited in line at the hot dog cart, trying not to think about the side order of bacteria they were no doubt getting with their lunch. He ferried the hot dogs and a couple of Cokes back to Joe and sat down beside him on the steps.

"This was a good idea," Joe said, taking a bite of his hot dog.

"Glad you approve," Max said, leaning his shoulder against Joe's.

They ate their lunch companionably, people-watching and determinedly not talking about business.

"Thanks," Joe said when they were done. "This was just what I needed."

"Wait. There's more." He pushed the bag into Joe's hands. "It's just a little something—um, maybe you should open it?"

"You didn't have to get me a gift," Joe said, but his smile was clearly pleased. He opened the box and froze, staring at the model of the Cessna 190.

Max felt suddenly ridiculous.

"I read in an article it was the first plane you ever flew," he started to babble. "And I thought it would remind you of why you're fighting so hard to save your company, and you know, with your obvious love of useless bric-a-brac in your office—" A terrible thought occurred to him. "Oh, God. That plane didn't crash, did it? Is somebody dead?"

Joe's eyes were suspiciously bright as he pulled Max into a one-armed hug. "Nobody's dead. And that's just about the nicest thing anybody has ever given me."

Max hugged him back. "I sincerely hope not."

Joe stroked his thumb along Max's cheek and laid a kiss on him, deep and long and full of gratitude.

"Okay, on second thought," Max said, "maybe it was pretty thoughtful." He lifted his mouth for another kiss.

Joe laughed and obliged him. "You're a good guy, Max. You know that?"

"I'm really not," Max said glumly. "But I did want to cheer you up."

Joe smiled. "Like I said. A good guy."

After some more kissing, they headed back to work. Max could not have been in a better mood if he'd tried—until he hit the

front office of Tomlin Foster and found Quinn, Judith and Sanderson lined up like a firing squad.

“Sure, I’ll read the strategy document you’ve put your blood, sweat and tears into,” Quinn parroted. *“I promise to get you feedback this morning.”* He put his hands on his hips. “Do you need a dictionary so you can look up the meaning of ‘a.m.’?”

Max drew in a breath for a lengthy retort, but Judith interrupted. “What are those expenses you’ve charged to the CompuMark account? A singing telegram to the CEO of the company? Have you lost your mind entirely?”

Max sniffed dismissively. “It was the only way I could get him to listen to reason. By making it rhyme and setting it to music.”

Judith never had understood the importance of guerilla tactics in advertising.

Sanderson grabbed him by the sleeve of his jacket. “You were supposed to be on a videoconference with Solis Toys five minutes ago. Do you even bother to check your calendar?”

“Why would I do that? Then I’ll just be stuck in meetings all day!”

Sanderson rolled her eyes. “Tomlin logic is a truly scary thing.” She manhandled him toward the conference room.

Quinn called after them, “If you don’t read and comment on my strategy document by the end of the day, I’m sabotaging your coffee.”

Max yelled back, “Has anyone ever mentioned that you people are total buzz kills?”

IT WAS late—well, later than usual—when Max finally got home that night. He’d given Joe a key, and he was already there,

although he hadn't taken off his suit jacket yet, so apparently he hadn't been there long.

He kissed Max's temple. "Hey." He looked as wiped out as Max felt.

"Takeout and TV?" Max ventured hopefully.

Joe smiled, some of the tension easing in his shoulders. "Takeout and TV."

They ate their chicken tikka masala and saag paneer on the couch, and afterward, Max curled up against Joe, resting his head on Joe's shoulder. There was a documentary on TV, something Joe had picked out, about the early years of aviation. Max wasn't really paying attention. Instead, he listened to the steady lub-dub of Joe's heart beating, enjoying the idle stroking of Joe's hand up and down his arm, the occasional kiss pressed to the top of his head.

Max must have nodded off, because the next thing he knew, there was drool, and Joe was quietly calling his name. He opened his eyes, feeling discombobulated. It took a moment or two before he was awake enough to realize the documentary's end credits were rolling.

"How long have I been out?" Max asked.

"Since the Wright brothers started flying gliders at Kitty Hawk." He kissed Max's forehead. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

Max let Joe guide him up from the couch and into his bedroom. He yawned widely and padded into the bathroom to brush his teeth. When he came back, Joe had taken off his tie and was working on his shirt. Max stopped to watch as Joe's chest was bared button by button. Joe looked up and caught him staring. He shrugged out of the shirt, smiling, and draped it over a chair. He gave Max a quick kiss on the mouth. "Hold that thought."

He ambled off, and Max heard water splashing in the bathroom. He turned down the bed, took off his watch, and

dumped the change from his pocket onto the dresser. Joe came back, toweling off his face, his hair slightly damp.

"Here," he said to Max. "Let me help you with this." He pulled Max's shirttail out of his pants and nimbly undid the buttons. He slid the shirt off Max's shoulders and threw it over another chair. He ran his hand up Max's side, staring at his body. Max's cock started to stir, and he reached for Joe's belt. Joe kissed Max's neck and the hollow of his collarbone, his breath warm and rousing on Max's skin.

Max pushed Joe's trousers down his legs. "Come on," he urged.

Joe stepped out of them and kicked them away.

"I was going to fold those for you," Max said dryly.

Joe grinned. "You've got more important things to do right now."

Like get naked, apparently. Joe took charge of Max's belt, pulling it free of the loops with a twist of his wrist. Max held onto Joe's arm for balance as Joe stripped the pants off him, leaving them in a tangled heap like his own. Joe drew Max close and kissed him. Max sank into the warmth of Joe's body. He closed his eyes and slid his hands up Joe's chest, over his shoulders and around his neck. Joe took his time, touching and looking, his hands rubbing up and down Max's arms, over his nipples, into his hair. Max pushed against Joe's hip, the cotton of his boxers dragging exquisitely over the head of his cock. He could feel that Joe was just as hard.

Every touch was comfortable and tender, and Max had the sudden thought that he could happily do this for the rest of his life. If he were less tired or less turned on, that would have freaked him out. It wasn't as if he had a particularly stellar track record where forever was concerned. Thankfully, all he could focus on right now was Joe and how good he felt.

Joe slid his hand into Max's boxers and fondled him.

Max sucked in a breath. "God."

"I want to blow you," Joe said.

Max smiled. "Great minds and all that. I want to blow you too."

Joe kissed him, grinning. "Let's see what we can do about that."

They lay down together and wriggled out of their underwear.

"How do you want—" Max started to say.

"Let me—" Joe sat up and lay down in the opposite direction so they were both on their sides, curled in toward each other. He stroked his thumb from the root to the tip of Max's cock. "You ready?"

Max shivered. *Ready* was a serious understatement.

Joe bent his head, and Max did too, and the sensation of Joe's cock and mouth blindsided him with pleasure. He'd always been a little skeptical about the whole sixty-nine thing, suspecting it took coordination and self-control that were just a little beyond him in the heat of the moment. But having Joe do the same things to him that he was doing to Joe... well, there was no denying what a turn-on that was. He opened his mouth and took Joe deeper. Joe returned the favor, and yes, this was so much better than Max had imagined.

"Mmm," Joe murmured around Max's cock, the vibration making Max gasp.

Joe's fingers stroked over Max's balls and then wandered further, touching his hole, not penetrating, just rubbing lightly. Max instinctively pushed back against his hand. For a moment, he considered asking Joe to fuck him, but they were both tired. Getting fucked could wait for another night.

The urgent feeling started to build at the base of Max's cock, and Joe must have sensed it, because he started to use his tongue on that little place under the head, something that never failed to get him off. His own ministrations to Joe's cock grew more erratic and uncoordinated until he finally pulled off altogether.

"Oh God, oh God." He came in Joe's mouth.

The orgasm left Max panting and a little shaky. Joe stroked his thigh and pressed one last kiss to his cock. Max took a big breath and got it together enough to go back down. Joe moaned loudly, as if Max had caught him by surprise. Max could feel the tension in Joe's thighs, knew what that meant, that Joe just really, really needed to come. He used his hand in time with his mouth and sucked determinedly, humming a little in the back of his throat because Joe always liked that. It wasn't long before Joe was arching his back and spilling bitter salt in Max's mouth.

Joe slumped against the sheets in a post-coital stupor, and Max gently nudged him until he was lying the right way around on the bed. He slid an arm around Joe's shoulders, and Joe settled his head on Max's chest.

"Mmm," Joe said drowsily.

Max kissed his hair. *I really could do this for the rest of my life.* That was his last thought before he fell off to sleep.

When he woke, he bolted straight upright, his eyes flying open. Not even the palest hint of light had broken through on the horizon yet. He glanced over at the clock. 5:17 in the morning. He scrambled out of bed, forgetting to be careful not to wake Joe. Fortunately, Joe was exhausted enough that he didn't even shift in his sleep. Max grabbed his laptop, curled up in the chair by the window, and frantically started to type up his ideas. This was it, finally, what their campaign had been missing.

An hour later, Joe finally stirred. Max was still in the same spot, still busily at work. Joe sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "What are you doing?"

“Being a genius,” Max told him distractedly, not looking up from the computer.

The covers rustled, and footsteps padded in his direction. Joe leaned over his shoulder, trying to snoop.

Max made shooing hands at him. “Are you seriously trying to interrupt my brilliance?”

“Is it really that good?” Joe asked.

Max made a face at him.

Joe broke into a huge smile. Max took a moment out from his work to hook a hand behind Joe’s neck and pull him down for a quick kiss. Once wasn’t quite enough, so he kissed him again, lingering this time. “I meant what I said. No one’s going to take your company away from you.”

Chapter Nine

AT WORK an hour later, Max strode down the line of creative offices, barking orders. "I need everyone in my office." He clapped his hands. "Right now, right now, right now. I have a vision for Avionics. I need you all to execute it."

Sanderson, who had been headed down the hall to the kitchen, stopped to harangue him. "You realize our presentation is in three days."

Max put his hands on his hips. "When have I ever not come through?"

Sanderson smirked. "I can send you the spreadsheet I keep of dates, times, and locations if you want."

Max ignored her and went back to herding his creative team. "Come on, people. Pick up the pace. Very important development to discuss here."

Isabel appeared in the hallway, Jason at her heels.

"What's this all about, Tomlin?" Jason asked gruffly.

"I've had a breakthrough. We need to redo everything. Quinn, get your butt out here. There's an emergency meeting in my office."

Quinn emerged, grumbling. "I'm trying to *work*, Max. I got about six minutes of sleep last night. So the last thing I need is you braying at me."

"Oh, please," Max scoffed. "You know you love this."

"Just because you keep saying that doesn't make it any more true!" Quinn snapped.

“Just because you keep denying it doesn’t make it any less true.” Quinn opened his mouth to continue the argument, and Max promptly cut him off. “My office. Let’s go. We’ve got work to do, and no one is leaving this building until everything is perfect.”

Sanderson started to follow the rest of the group, a mulish expression on her face that announced she had no intention of being left out. To make matters worse, Judith had appeared out of nowhere, as if she had some kind of mysterious radar that alerted her whenever company resources were in jeopardy of being expended. The woman was such a miser Max sometimes wondered how her fingers didn’t fall off from all that penny-pinching she did. She too headed toward Max’s office.

He held up a hand like a stop sign. “Oh, no. Creative team only.”

Sanderson snorted. “Right. You’re crazy if you think you’re pulling one of your last-minute ‘change everything, change everything *now*’ dramas without my input. I can already tell it’s going to be fruity.”

“I can tell it’s going to be expensive,” Judith added, her mouth pulled down at the corners.

Max said in exasperation, “All right, fine! Have it your way. The more people to witness my genius the better.”

Everyone took seats while Max paced from his desk to the bookshelf and back again, too much energy to sit still.

“Imagine the most stunning aerial photographs you’ve ever seen,” he began, “with different tones, different textures, all creating shapes, pictures within a picture that you can’t take your eyes off.”

“Shapes?” Isabel said uncertainly.

“*Shapes*,” Max reiterated. “Like those ads that have aerial photos of green fields that look like circuit boards, only not that,

since it's already been used by every two-bit technology company on the planet. Something unique. Elegant. Compelling."

Isabel still looked perplexed but said, "I will do my best."

"Let me tell you the line. That should help you." Max bounced on his toes. "Avionics. *The world looks different from up here.*" He looked around the room, waiting for a reaction.

Sanderson frowned. "Is that a tagline? A headline?"

"It's, it's," Max sputtered, "it's *the* line."

"Thanks," Sanderson said with more than a hint of sarcasm. "That clears up everything."

"Like it," Jason grunted.

"Of course you do," Max said smugly. "*I* wrote it."

Quinn rolled his eyes. "As much as I hate to feed the ego that ate Manhattan, the line does have a lot going for it. It gets across the sense of marvel about flight we've all agreed is important. We've got the word 'different' in there, suggesting the air travel experience is better and safer with Avionics. And it also implies that Avionics is the leader in the marketplace, looking down on all its would-be competitors, without us actually having to come right out and say so. That's a powerful lot for one line to do."

"All right," Judith said, "it sounds like this is the line. Isabel will explore the idea of aerial photographs—"

"With *shapes!*" Max interjected.

"With shapes," Judith amended. "My question is: How much of this can we show for the presentation?"

"We have to show everything," Max insisted. "Of course, the most important piece is the brand movie. I've already written a script for it." He tapped his finger on his chin. "I wonder if Scorsese is available."

"A brand movie?" Quinn said skeptically. "In three days?"

"Oh, all right, fine!" Max said huffily. "Forget Scorsese. We'll put it together with stock footage. As long as we have the right images, it should still be spectacular."

"*Three days*, Max," Quinn said, giving him a look like he was crazy.

Max threw up his arms in exasperation. "Yes, yes, someone is going to have to wake up the production department and tell them they actually have work to do. I realize what an imposition that is."

"I didn't know Avionics planned to do television," Judith said with a wrinkle between her eyebrows.

"They don't." Lisa shot a snide look at Max.

"Then why would we—" Judith began.

"To make an impression!" Max declared. "To capture the essence of the brand we're creating. To *sell* the client on Tomlin Foster." He put his hands on his hips. "You did all get that memo, didn't you? That this is what we do. We *sell* things."

"What else are you planning to use to sell this idea of yours?" Judith asked warily.

"I'm glad you asked," Max told her. "We also need a public-facing website."

Everyone in the room groaned out loud.

"Do you know how much time—" Sanderson began.

"Give me some credit, okay? I'm not *insane*," Max snapped. "Not a fully functional website. Just a home page, but it needs to sparkle. Right now, what they've got is technical, business-to-business. We need something that will appeal to the average person, you know, someone who has the attention span of a gnat. I'm thinking we can bring in the motif of the aerial photography with a flight simulator experience. There could even be other planes on screen, and if you pilot too close to them, you get a

warning, a mini demonstration of how the actual technology works.”

“A flight simulator?” Judith stared at him with her mouth open. “In three days?”

Max waved his hand airily. “We can put that nerd genius kid to work on it. What’s his name? Barney or Biff or something like that.”

“You mean Brian Lester, the head of our interactive division?” Judith said disbelievingly.

Max snapped his fingers. “That’s the one. He can’t possibly have anything more important to do. Which reminds me, we also need to wrap the conference room over at Avionics with the best image we come up with. The whole room.” He threw his arms out dramatically. “Just the image and the line, in the biggest type known to man.”

“Logistically speaking, I don’t see how we’ll have time to do that before the presentation starts,” Sanderson said. “The client has a really tight schedule. We only get an hour.”

Max glared at her. “Figure something out. Are we problem-solvers or not?”

“Anything else?” Judith asked wearily.

“Tchotchkes,” Max told her.

Quinn raised an eyebrow. “I thought you hated giving out cheap pieces of crap with the corporate logo splattered all over it.”

“Not in this case,” Max said. “I want everyone at Avionics buried under as many cheap pieces of crap as we can lay our hands on, with the new logo we’ve designed blazoned over all of it. I want the people making this decision surrounded by our work, so it’s like we’ve already won the account. You know what they say. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

“Possession—” Quinn frowned. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

Max scowled at him. “You know what I mean!”

“Gonna be a lot of work,” Jason said, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Yes,” Max agreed, “which explains why you’re all sitting here doing nothing.” When they didn’t spring right up, he clapped his hands loudly. “Get to work, get to work, get to work!”

They rose to their feet at last, even if it was somewhat reluctantly, and filed out of his office.

Sanderson was the last to go. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

He lifted his chin, a definite challenge. “I’ll remind you we had this conversation after we’ve won the account.”

THE next few days passed in a crazy, sleep-deprived blur. Max ran himself ragged storming down to the production department every five minutes, riding herd on the editor who kept trying to sully Max’s glorious vision of the brand movie with freeze frames and split screens and other god-awful tacky effects too horrible to contemplate. Then, too, he needed to check up on the nerd genius kid, who started to get a little snippy the fourteenth or so time Max mentioned that the flight simulator experience needed to be truly dazzling, not some throwback to the early days of Atari. And of course, Max had to crack the whip on his own team as well.

At one point, he wrinkled his nose, registering that something in his office smelled really rather bad. Sadly, it turned out to be him. When he thought about it, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d showered or so much as changed his shirt. None of them

had had time for luxuries like sleep or hygiene. Even Isabel had started to look frazzled and a little grubby around the edges.

Max was putting the finishing touches on the creative setup for the presentation deck. He reached for his mug and lifted it to his mouth. It took a few seconds for it to sink in that there was nothing in it. God, he needed more coffee.

Almost the moment he thought it, the door to his office swung open, and Abby appeared. She sat down a fresh mug in front of him. "I thought you could use this. And also this." She handed over a new shirt, still in the Brooks Brothers packaging.

He checked the label. It was the right size. He glanced up at her questioningly.

"You looked to be the same size as one of my old boyfriends. I took a chance. You might also need this." She hesitantly produced a package of Speed Stick. "Um. No offense intended. Let me know if you need anything else."

She bounced out of the office with apparently limitless energy, and Max felt certain he deserved some kind of award for achievement in the hiring of administrative help.

Moments later, he had to reconsider this opinion when his phone buzzed. He snatched it up, sarcasm on the tip of his tongue, but Abby headed him off. "I know you're not to be disturbed, but it's Mr. Bennett."

He let out his breath, his sense of indignation deflating. "Yes, yes. Put him through."

"Hey," Joe's voice pulsed over the line.

"Hey," Max said, his voice softening.

"I just wanted to check in, see how it's going."

"It's all coming together," Max told him, "but I'll still probably be working right up to the presentation."

"Oh," Joe said, sounding a little disappointed.

They hadn't seen each other since Max had had his brainstorm. Common sense might not have gotten in the way of their romance, but working twenty-hour days was another matter entirely.

"I know," Max said. "It sucks."

"Well, when I do see you," Joe said, "we're going to have to make up for lost time."

He went into some detail about what he was planning—rather delightfully lewd detail. By the time Max hung up, he was smiling.

Chapter Ten

THE day before the presentation, Max and Quinn almost came to blows.

"The work is there!" Quinn yelled. "Stop running around like a chicken with its head cut off, throwing everyone into pandemonium, changing things just to be changing them. That kind of crazy is why I quit this business in the first place!"

"Yeah? Well, maybe you should quit again. If you're not going to have any pride. If you're not going to care about doing our best." He put on a mimicking voice, "*Let's just all turn off our brains and declare ourselves finished. We're an advertising agency. Why would we actually need to think?*"

Quinn's face darkened. "There's thinking, and then there's overthinking. And then there's being an insane, delusional, over-caffeinated dictator!" He pointed his finger, nearly poking Max in the nose.

"At least I'm not a hippy-dippy granola eater!" Max shot back, taking an aggressive step closer.

Quinn, not to be outdone, took a step forward himself, so that they were practically bumping chests. "At least I'm not going to stroke out before I'm fifty!"

"Oh, yeah? Well—" Then something occurred to Max. "Hey, we're yelling at each other instead of working."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "So we are."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and then they both broke into smiles.

“We are so going to nail this account,” Max said.

It had never failed in all the years Max and Quinn had worked together. When they were all business before a pitch, they didn’t get it. When they started yelling and flinging personal insults and trying to strangle each other with their neckties, they walked away with the business totally in the bag.

“Let’s get everyone in the conference room to practice,” Max said. “Judith and Sanderson should come too, so they can’t bitch later that there was something they didn’t like.”

Quinn nodded and then hesitated a moment. “You were right, you know. I did kind of miss this. It’s—it wasn’t a bad thing that you harassed me into coming back.”

Max rolled his eyes. “Are you seriously just figuring that out now? I’m pretty sure you used to be much smarter.”

Quinn snorted. “Thanks, Max. I’m so glad we could have this touching moment together.” He started for the door.

“Quinn.”

He turned back around.

“I—” Max groped around for the right thing to say. He was so bad at this. “It wasn’t the same without you.”

Quinn smiled. “Of course, it wasn’t. You didn’t have anyone to call you an over-caffeinated dictator. I can see how’d you miss that.”

He went off to round up the team, and twenty minutes later, they assembled in the conference room.

Isabel shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I feel as if I am a child at the grownups’ table where I do not yet belong.”

Jason stood on the other side of the table, at the far end of the room, experimenting. “Can you hear me now?”

“Just barely,” Isabel shouted back.

“What?” Jason cupped his hand to his ear.

Judith shot Max an I-told-you-so look

Max glared at Jason and Isabel. “Are we quite finished playing with the new conference table now, you juvenile delinquents?”

Sanderson came hurrying in. “Sorry I’m late! The call with Filbert’s Foods ran late. What’d I miss?”

Jason plunked down next to Isabel, back from his little trek to the other side of the room. “Just Tomlin getting defensive about his interior-decorating skills. Or lack thereof.”

“I really will fire you one of these days,” Max told him.

“Oh God, I should have realized this was all your fault, Tomlin,” Sanderson said, as she squeezed between the table and the wall to get to her seat.

“If we’re all done with the conference table talk,” Judith checked her watch, “I’ve got half an hour.”

“Fine, fine. Let’s move on to something that’s actually *important*.” Max glanced pointedly at Jason. “So I assume tomorrow when we make the presentation, Sanderson, you’ll act as our emcee?”

Lisa nodded. “I’ll start by introducing myself and the agency. Then get all of you to introduce yourselves. I’ll set up our approach, and then I’ll turn it over to Quinn to take them through the strategy.”

“Right,” Quinn said, typing at his computer, bringing up the Power Point on the large screen on the wall. “So, you’ve all seen this. I’ll start by discussing Avionics’ objectives. Take them through a review of competitive advertising. Set out our media recommendations. And that’ll bring us to the big idea, and I’ll turn it over to Max and his team for the creative part.”

"Then we'll proceed to dazzle them with our genius," Max said. "Judith, Sanderson, let me introduce you to the new Avionics."

He dimmed the lights and cued up the brand movie. Music swelled. The screen sprang to life. Everyone in the room leaned forward in their seats, Max was pleased to note. By the time the two-minute movie had finished playing, even Sanderson seemed impressed.

"I have to hand it to you, Max," Judith said. "I didn't think you could pull that off in the few days you had, but you really did it."

"There's much, much more where that came from," Max assured her.

He showed them the website, which had turned out just as dazzling as he'd hoped, even if the genius nerd kid had threatened to kill him once or twice or possibly a dozen times. He let Isabel and Jason take them through the print and outdoor executions. They passed around the boards after they'd finished the spiel, so Judith and Sanderson could take a closer look. Max showed off the pile of useless bric-a-brac glittering with the beautiful new Avionics logo. Judith and Sanderson sifted through it, their foreheads creased with concentration.

At last, Judith said, "I'm wowed."

"Me too," Sanderson admitted grudgingly.

"You don't have to sound so surprised about it!" Max huffed.

Judith laughed. "Nothing you do ever surprises me, Max." She got to her feet. "Very nice work, everyone. I feel confident we'll come away with a win tomorrow." She headed off to her next meeting.

"Yeah, guys, everything looks great," Sanderson said, also getting up from the table. "I've got a car scheduled to come get us

at nine in the morning. The presentation's not until 10:15, but in case we get caught in traffic heading uptown."

"That sounds wise, Lisa," Isabel said.

Sanderson nodded. "Okay. See you all in the morning."

She left, and Max's team started to leave as well.

"Where do you think you're going?" Max asked them.

They stopped in their tracks, looking confused.

"I thought we were done," Quinn said.

"You call what we just did a run through?" Max scoffed. "We've got some serious practicing to do if we're going to be good enough for tomorrow."

Quinn groaned. "Why do the rest of us have to suffer just because you're sleeping with the client?"

Max's mouth fell open. "I—"

"Come on, Tomlin," Jason said. "Everybody knows."

"I think it is very sweet, Max," Isabel said, coming to his defense. "Joe Bennett seems like a very good man."

"I—you—" Max sputtered and then finally just gave up. "Fine. So you know. Now sit down, and we're going to practice and practice and practice some more until I feel confident you're going to do my boyfriend's life's work the appropriate justice."

He nodded meaningfully at their chairs. They all sighed and slumped back down into their seats.

"Good. Now, let's get started."

They went through the whole thing, in much more detail this time, and then Max insisted they do it all over again. "With some conviction this time," he told them.

At the threat of a fourth round, his team finally mutinied.

"Are you stark-raving mad?" Quinn yelled at him.

“Need to save something for tomorrow,” Jason said.

“I believe Jason is correct,” Isabel said. “We are all clear on what we need to do. The best thing will be to go home and get a good night’s rest, so tomorrow we will be at our best.”

She glanced at Max, looking as if she might start tearing her hair out if he absolutely insisted on another time through the presentation. Making Isabel crazy was usually a sign he needed to back off.

He sighed. “Fine. If you’re sure you’re ready—”

“Absolutely certain,” Isabel assured him, scrambling to her feet.

“It’s going to be great,” Quinn added.

“Later,” Jason mumbled.

They fled, leaving Max alone in the echoing conference room. He sat there, at loose ends, and finally thought to check his watch. It wasn’t even ten yet. Not working until his head threatened to explode the night before a pitch felt wrong. He considered calling Joe. They could have dinner, at least. Max’s mind wandered for a second or two, picturing Joe on his hands and knees in Max’s bed. There were so many interesting ways they could spend the rest of the evening together.

But he didn’t pick up the phone. A sliver of superstition lurked in the back of Max’s mind (not that he would ever admit this to anyone) that seeing Joe the night before the pitch was somehow bad luck. Like the groom seeing the bride before the wedding, except... not at all like that! No one was even thinking the m-word.

Max managed to freak himself out enough that he finally got up from the table. He headed back to his office and found Abby still at her desk, bent over a stack of forms.

“I hope this isn’t a ploy to rack up the overtime,” he told her.

“End of the month stuff. Accounting said if you don’t get these purchase orders sorted out and on their desk by tomorrow morning, they’re going to hunt you down and take back your corporate Amex to teach you a lesson. They said Ms. Foster—”

“—was totally backing them up on it,” Max finished the sentence for her. “Well, then. Carry on. Burn all the midnight oil you need.”

Max *really* liked his corporate Amex.

He packed up his briefcase and decided to walk home. He might be physically exhausted, but his mind revved like a car engine. If he didn’t do something to unwind, he’d never be able to sleep. Outside, traffic honked and roared past him. He took his favorite route home, through the little park with the statue of Alexander Hamilton, by the string of boutiques and the place with the good dark chocolate, slowing down in front of the shoe store. Further downtown, he could see the towers of Wall Street rising in a jumble toward the sky. He felt the same way he had when he’d first landed in the city twenty years ago: that this was his time, his town, and everything was possible.

At home, he unlocked the door to his apartment, and the stillness rushed to meet him. Marco had lived with him for nearly three months, and Max had barely noticed his absence when he’d gone. Joe had been to the apartment a handful of times, and the place just didn’t feel right without him. Max set his briefcase down with a sigh, took his tie off, and tossed it onto the table by the door. He went to the kitchen to scrounge up some leftovers for dinner, found cold sesame noodles and cucumber salad. He sacked out on the couch and flipped on the television.

There was some sitcom on involving a garbage collector with a heart of gold, a cross-dressing tax attorney, and a talking ferret. Max rolled his eyes. So much for that new golden age of television he’d just been reading about in *Ad Age*. He ate his dinner, flipping through the channels. His eyes were dry and gritty from too many

hours parked in front of the computer. Every nerve in his body felt strained to the breaking point. He was reconciling himself to the possibility that he might not be able to sleep at all when his thoughts began to get more disjointed and fuzzy.

The next thing he knew, he had a crease on his face from the throw pillow. He dragged himself up from the couch and stumbled to his room, shedding clothes as he went. He fell face-forward onto his bed. Brushing his teeth, and everything else, would have to wait until morning.

Chapter Eleven

MAX jolted awake—it seemed like only moments later—with an evil buzzing sensation shooting through his head. For a panicked second, he was convinced he was being electrocuted. Perhaps Marco had finally come back to take his revenge, or Christine had decided to do away with the competition the old-fashioned way: homicide. When a few more neurons began to fire, Max realized it was just the phone ringing on the bedside table. He scowled at the clock. It was all of 5:30 in the morning.

He snatched up the receiver. “Somebody better be dead.”

“Possibly me,” answered a bleak, scratchy voice. “Or my company at the very least.”

It was Joe. Max sat up in bed, instantly alert. “What’s wrong?”

“I just got frantic calls from the other three agencies in the pitch. Something’s happened... sabotage, I guess. Anyway, all their work is gone. Erased off the network. Not even a scrap left in the garbage. Nothing. Apparently, they all had new employees who have now disappeared. Omnion plants, we assume.”

“What are the other agencies going to do?” Max asked, trying not to take too much pleasure in imagining how Christine must have melted down over this, not when Joe was the one ultimately getting screwed.

“They asked for extensions to recreate the work, but we’re already down to the wire. I’ve got to present something to the board. If we don’t get a campaign out there soon, we won’t be able

to fend off the takeover bid. Just tell me you don't have anybody new working for you."

Max's brain finally caught up with him, and his stomach lurched. *Oh, shit!*

"Max?" Joe said plaintively.

"I've got to—just give me a few minutes. I'll call you from the office." Max hung up and scrambled out of bed, practically leaping into his clothes.

Outside, he rushed to the curb, hopping up and down in his haste to flag a cab. On the upside, no one else was out at this hour, no one who might sneak up and steal *his* taxi, which was good, because Max wasn't above resorting to physical violence just at the moment. On the downside, there weren't many cabs out, either. He did an impatient dance on the sidewalk, no doubt looking like a little kid who had to go to the bathroom to anyone watching. Finally, a blessed yellow car came into view way down Hudson with its on-duty light happily on.

It stopped, and Max flung himself inside, babbling the address. "Hurry, hurry, hurry!"

The driver stomped on the gas and showed a reckless disregard for human life: his own, Max's, and those of the few hapless joggers and pedestrians unlucky enough to be out before the sun was even up.

The car screeched to a halt outside Max's office building. He tossed money at the driver, leaped from the car, and ran up the steps, into the lobby, and past the heavy-lidded security guard, who blinked at Max like he was crazy.

Max pushed the button for the elevator approximately fourteen million times until it finally dinged open. Upstairs, he swiped his card key and tore down the hall to his office. He threw the door open and skidded to a stop inside. The boards he'd left neatly stacked on his desk were gone. He stood there unable to

breathe, the taste of bile in the back of his throat. When he could finally make himself move, he walked over to the corkboard and scanned it. Every layout Isabel had printed out for him, every scrap of paper with an idea for Avionics, had been removed. He hurried over to his computer and booted it up, his fingers fumbling on the keys in his desperation. Then he really couldn't breathe. The entire folder, all their work, had been erased.

He snatched up the phone and dialed Chet, the IT guy, at home. He knew the number by heart. Technology and Max had a way of not getting along.

"Huh?" an aggrieved voice answered.

"Backups!" Max screeched, panic making him lose his grip on language and possibly his sanity. "Need backups! Now, now, now!"

There was a pause that felt infinitely long. "Mr. Tomlin?" Chet said slowly.

"Yes! Oh my God, who else would it be? We've been robbed!"

"Robbed?" Chet repeated stupidly.

"I don't have time for this! Someone has taken all our work for the Avionics pitch. Erased everything off the network. We need to recreate it. I need you to get me the files from the backup."

"Oh, that's terrible," Chet said, sounding much sharper now. "I can access the backup server from here. I'll call you back when I've restored the files."

Max gave him the name of the folder and hung up. About a sixteenth of a second later, he'd waited as long as he could possibly stand without doing something. Patience never had been his virtue. He needed to take matters into his own hands. He'd just—he'd go to Abby's place, force his way inside, and take back their work! The idea instantly had him breathing easier. He fumbled around in his desk drawer for her contact information and then remembered. He'd never actually *asked* anything about her. That was usually Kate's job, and Max hadn't thought.... A

picture played in his head, of Kate and Judith shouting at him in tag team, or quite possibly putting out a contract on his life. It was a true testament to just how fucked he was that this was the least of his problems at the moment.

Max let out his breath. He wasn't sure exactly what Plan B was going to be, but he'd need his team for it. He speed-dialed Quinn, Isabel and Jason in turn. They all hectored him for details, because no one could follow simple instructions anymore.

He ended up shouting into the phone at each of them, "I'll explain later. Just get here! Now!"

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting in his office, although none of them could quite seem to grasp what he was saying.

"Abby?" Quinn must have repeated at least ten times. "She always seemed so—"

"Well, she wasn't," Max snapped. "She was a dirty, no-good, filthy traitor."

Also, the best assistant Max had ever had, but he kept that to himself.

"Got to be something left," Jason grunted, more preverbal than usual since he'd been roused out of bed at the crack of dawn.

"Yes," Isabel said firmly, "we must go and search every place we can think of. Perhaps there is something they have forgotten."

Max waved his hand tiredly. He remembered too well what Joe had said about even the trash having been taken at the other agencies. "You're not going to find anything."

They insisted on going on the fool's errand anyway. Max slumped in his chair, waiting for them to come back with their little dejected faces. He pinched the bridge of his nose. This did nothing to help ease the jackhammer sensation that was building behind his eyes. He doubted there was enough Imitrex on the planet to ward off this migraine.

Isabel was the first to return, and as predicted, she looked like a kicked puppy. “I thought there would be something left forgotten on the printers or in the trash.”

“Fuckers got to the production department and the interactive guys too,” Jason said, stomping back into Max’s office. “They don’t have anything left, either.”

He had the expression of a man in serious need of something to kick. Max would have offered his desk for that purpose, but the delicate teak got marked at the least little thing. It would never stand up to Jason and those gunboats he had for feet.

Quinn reappeared at last, staggering into the office like an accident survivor. “I—there’s—” His eyes weren’t entirely focused, and his voice was barely audible. “Nothing. My beautiful strategy deck! I used to always take a copy of everything home with me, but I haven’t done this for so long. I didn’t think—”

Quinn stared vacantly into space, like he didn’t know his own name. *That’s just great*, Max thought. Quinn was going to go into shock on him, like something out of a bad made-for-TV movie.

Max pointed a finger at him. “The last thing I need is to have paramedics crawling all over the office. So buck up! I’m not above pouring cold water over your head if the situation calls for it. You know I’m not!”

Quinn blinked, as if he’d just now realized where he was. “Max?”

Max sighed. Isabel helped Quinn to a chair, patting him sympathetically on the arm.

“Can we get more time?” Jason asked.

Max shook his head. “Joe has to get out there with stuff soon, or he won’t be able to thwart the takeover.” His phone rang, and he snatched it up. “Please tell me this is good news.”

“Um, well—” Chet sounded apologetic.

That was *never* a good sign.

Max rubbed at his pounding temples. "What?"

"It seems all those files have been erased from the backup too. I really don't understand how that could have happened. Somebody would need to have an administrative password to do that. My team and you and Judith are the only ones who—"

"Yes," Max quickly interrupted. "I can't imagine how that could have happened."

The moment when he'd handed over all his passwords to Abby replayed like a bad movie in his head, accompanied by the soundtrack to *Jaws*. Judith was going to murder him and hide his body beneath the floorboards in the copy room when she found out. And sadly, that *still* wasn't Max's biggest problem.

Every pair of eyes in the room was glued on him as he hung up the phone. He shook his head. "No backup."

"No backup?" Quinn repeated.

"Yes! No backup! I'm glad we all understand basic English."

Isabel frowned. "But how is that possible?"

"It just is!" Max said. "Are we going to sit around all day pointing fingers? Or are we going to figure out what to do?"

Isabel looked bewildered by Max's outburst. "Of course, we must try to find a solution, but I cannot help but be curious how the backup could have been tampered with when so few people have access to that server."

"Tomlin knows something he's not telling," Jason said.

Quinn's face darkened with suspicion. "Max, did you have something to do with my beautiful strategy document disappearing off the face of the Earth?"

"Will you all just be quiet and let me think?" Max half shouted.

They fell silent, however reluctantly. Max leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling. *Come on, come on*, he urged himself. *Think, think!* The seconds ticking by on the clock sounded ominous and made him even edgier than he already was. And then he realized: he didn't have a clock. That was his heart pounding away in his chest.

"Only got a few hours. Don't know what we can do," Jason said.

At the same time, Max bolted upright and snapped his fingers. "I've got it! Don Draper."

"Don Draper," Quinn said dubiously.

"Who is Mr. Draper?" Isabel asked. "I do not believe I have met him."

Max should have known Isabel didn't watch television. He would never, if he lived to be a thousand years old, understand how she managed to be successful in the advertising business when she had virtually no knowledge of pop culture.

"He's a character on *Mad Men*," Jason explained to her.

"I still don't get the point," Quinn said.

Max let out a big, *do I have to explain everything* sigh. "We pull a Don Draper. You know, all big idea and verbal dazzle. Sell them on the dream. Then we can recreate the executions after we win the account."

Quinn stared at him disbelievingly. "You know that's just a television show, right?"

"It's very accurate!" Max insisted.

"About how they did things fifty years ago," Jason said.

"Do any of you have a better plan?" He looked at each one of them in turn, and no one volunteered anything. "That's what I thought. Isabel, I need you to draw the key visuals of the campaign. They don't have to be perfect. Just evocative. Jason, do

your best to recreate the copy. Quinn, sum up the spirit of the campaign in a paragraph.”

Quinn opened his mouth, scandalized. “A paragraph! That strategy document was fifty pages of my best insights!”

Max flailed his arms at him. “Just do it!”

At last, he seemed to impart a sense of urgency, because they rushed off to do as he’d said, although not without a parting venomous glare from Quinn.

Max took a moment after they’d gone to just sit there and try to relearn how to breathe. Then he picked up the phone. “We’ll be there for our presentation at ten,” he told Joe when he answered.

“Oh, thank God,” Joe said, with a relieved rush of breath. “I’m so glad Omnion didn’t get to you guys too.”

Max said nothing.

“Max?” Joe sounded less certain.

“I said we’ll be there, Joe,” Max assured him. “And we will. ”

He hung up and slumped back in his chair. He just wasn’t sure exactly what they were going to say when they got there.

Chapter Twelve

THE cars Sanderson had arranged were waiting for them when they finally staggered out of the building around 9:30, bleary-eyed, yawning, and armed only with their ideas, the stack of drawings Isabel had managed to finish, and the motivating spirit of a television character. *We are so screwed*, Max thought.

"I'm only coming because we need to put on a united front as an agency," Sanderson said as she clambered into the car. "But you're the one who messed this up, Tomlin. So you're the one who's going to do the explaining to the client."

"Fine," Max said, shoving her over to make room for himself. "It's not as if I'd let you do the talking anyway. If anyone has any chance of pulling this off, it's me."

"Fine," Sanderson said. She pointedly turned to look out the window and ignored him for the rest of the ride.

Sanderson had been seriously displeased that Max hadn't called her the instant he realized their work had been tampered with. She'd taken off one of her shoes and thrown it at him when he'd told her he hadn't called her because she only made things worse.

Traffic was light, the only lucky break they'd gotten so far today, and their cars pulled up in front of the Avionics building a quick fifteen minutes later.

Max couldn't remember the last time he'd been nervous about a presentation. Annoyed? Yes, frequently. Convinced the cretins he was presenting to didn't have the faintest chance of

grasping his genius? Far too often. But nervous? That wasn't in the Tomlin vocabulary.

Until now.

It didn't help that they were met at the elevator on their way into Avionics by Joe, who altogether lacked his usual cool. His tie hung askew. His hair practically stood on end, as if volunteering to be ripped out. There was a decidedly hunted look in his eyes. The fact that someone who had seen actual *combat* was that frazzled certainly didn't give Max's confidence a boost.

"You've got stuff to show, right?" Joe asked, as he walked them toward the conference room.

"We've got... stuff," Max said vaguely.

His team exchanged uneasy glances amongst themselves. Max shot them a death glare. Did no one understand the meaning of the words "game face"?

Joe ushered them into the conference room. Isabel and Jason went to hang up the drawings. Quinn and Sanderson settled at the table, taking out folders and papers, all of it completely useless window dressing. Max scanned the room, getting the lay of the land. A handful of executives in suits milled around, checking Blackberrys and having quiet conversations. So this was Joe's board, huh?

Max gave the lot of them the once-over. After twenty years in the business, he practically had X-ray vision where clients were concerned, and there were always the same predictable characters in any group. A quick perusal told Max this bunch would be no different.

There was a ruddy-cheeked, pot-bellied man with a booming voice, who would be all big talk and big plans but wouldn't want to spend a cent to make it happen. The twitchy one with the glasses would be the nitpicker who had the brand standards practically tattooed on his ass. The woman with the Vogue haircut and the

designer suit probably fancied herself a creative type, maybe even a writer, which meant that Max would have to fight off the temptation to put out a contract on her life if they ended up working together. The two crowding around the refreshment table had “yes men” written all over them. They’d do whatever Joe wanted, so, hey, at least there would be two votes for Tomlin Foster.

None of the group looked especially formidable, and under any other circumstances, Max would have been feeling rather superior just then. But these were the people who held the future of Joe’s company in their hands, so all he could do was hope for a miracle.

Sanderson straightened her skirt, squared her shoulders, and went to introduce herself, dragging Max along for the ride. “If you can’t manage to hang onto our creative,” she said under her breath, “the least you can do is be polite.”

“When am I ever not polite?” he demanded.

She rolled her eyes at him, plastered on a smile, and went to shake some hands. Max followed in her wake, repeating “Max Tomlin, good to meet you” about a million times.

“You guys want some coffee or water or something before we get started?” Joe asked.

“Coffee. God, yes,” Max said.

Joe gave him a sideways smile. Max’s chest clenched. If he didn’t pull this off.... No, he couldn’t think about that now.

They grabbed some beverages. Joe and his board settled at the far end of the table. Max and his team took their places up front.

Max rose to his feet. It was up to him to sell this low-tech presentation. He swallowed hard. “So, we all know advertising pitches these days have turned into big sideshows. One agency I know brought along an actual circus troupe to a presentation.

And what gets lost in all this? The idea. Which is the only thing that really matters. At Tomlin Foster, we think it's time to get back to basics. So you're not going to see a lot of distractions today. No smoke and mirrors. No jugglers. Just smart thinking."

He took a breath and tried to gauge the reaction in the room. They were as stone-faced as statues. Great. Just great.

"When we started considering a campaign for your company, we began, not surprisingly, with the notion of safety. That's what your technology is all about. And hey, safety is good. People need to know they're safe. The only problem with this as a strategy? There's no grandeur in caution. Nothing that catches people's imaginations. Flying, on the other hand.... Well, that's a completely different story. Even one hundred and six years after Kitty Hawk, flight is still a great romance, a never-ending adventure. So we knew we needed to take your campaign a step further. We needed to show that Avionics makes it safe for people to explore, to expand their world. Avionics makes it safe not to play it safe."

Max nodded to Quinn, and he took over. "That's a top line view of our strategy. Now let's talk about how we see the spirit of Avionics translating into specific recommendations."

Max kept a carefully attentive expression plastered on his face, but the words just kind of blurred together. He didn't even try to listen. In other circumstances, he might have directed the occasional surreptitious glance over at the board members to see if they'd become any less opaque. But, call him a coward, he just wasn't up to meeting Joe's eye right now. He stared down at his hands on the table.

Quinn segued to Isabel, who took them through the drawings, bringing them to life. Jason chimed in, reading the headlines that went with the images, paraphrasing the copy, and wrapping up each one with the main theme line: *The world looks different from up here*. They finished and sat down and looked to

Max uncertainly. He hesitated a moment and then went with his instincts.

He rose to his feet again. "Your company started with a simple, bold vision and a deep love of flying. Your advertising should do no less. I'm reminded of the story of Icarus, whose curiosity took him too close to the sun and melted his wings. The great promise of Avionics is as simple as this: Today's travelers can let their sense of adventure soar, without having to worry they'll fall."

There was always a moment after Max finished making a presentation when he could feel how it went in the pit of his stomach, a giddy flutter when he'd nailed it, a sensation like a plummeting stone when he'd blown it. Right now he felt... nothing at all. He had no idea what that meant.

At last, he ventured a glance over at Joe. There was a strange look on his face, not anything readily identifiable, but Max had the sinking sense he'd just screwed up more than Tomlin Foster's chances to win this account.

"Well," Max said, his shoulders slumping. "We'll leave you to talk it over."

He nodded to his team. They gathered up their things and headed for the elevator.

When they were out of earshot, Quinn said, "I don't think that went too badly, all things considered."

"They didn't throw things at us if that's what you mean," Max said bleakly.

"You know there's nothing I hate more than giving you a compliment, Tomlin," Sanderson said, "but you did some fancy talking back there. If they don't eat up that Icarus crap, I don't know anything about advertising."

He pulled a face at her. "My point exactly."

“Hey, Max,” Joe’s voice came distantly from the vicinity of the conference room. “Hold on a minute.”

Oh, God. Max really couldn’t face talking to Joe right now. He kept walking, pretending he hadn’t heard him.

Isabel put a hand on his arm. “I believe Mr. Bennett would have a word with you.”

“Get in the elevator,” he told her tersely.

“Tomlin,” Sanderson objected.

“Elevator.” Max glared at her.

Max poked at the button for the lobby. The doors shut before he had to get an up-close-and-personal view of what disappointment looked like on the face of Joe Bennett.

Outside, their cars were still lined up in front of the building, waiting for them. Jason and Isabel headed for one, Sanderson and Quinn the other. Max stalled there on the sidewalk.

Sanderson tossed a look back over her shoulder. “Come on, Tomlin. We don’t have all day.”

“Go on without me. I’m going to—” *Walk. Drown myself in the East River. Whatever.*

“Max,” Isabel said, sounding concerned.

Even Jason chimed in, “You did all anyone could do, Tomlin.”

He shook his head. They didn’t understand, and he couldn’t explain. He was *Max Tomlin*. This—*failure*, there, he’d finally allowed himself to think the word—just didn’t happen to him. And now it had, when succeeding had never been more important.

“Come on.” Sanderson dragged Quinn into the car. “I’ve got a conference call in twenty minutes. I can’t wait around all day while Tomlin has a nervous breakdown.”

Max watched as both cars pulled away. He let out his breath and turned, not caring which way he went, not even feeling the

hard pavement beneath his feet. He stopped when there was traffic, without thinking, and then started back up again when it was clear, letting the city carry him along.

His phone rang, and he ignored it, not checking to see who it was. It rang again, and he fished it out of his pocket and turned it off. He really wasn't in the mood to chat.

When Max had first moved to the city twenty years ago, he'd made such a pittance working as a junior copywriter that all he could afford apartment-wise was a tiny place over on the East River that he'd shared with a roommate he'd scrounged up from an ad in the *Voice*. The guy had been a musician in what was perhaps the world's most talentless rock band. He slept all day while Max worked and was gone for the night by the time Max got home, so it was practically like living alone, except for the dirty dishes Max would find in the sink and the stink of Eternity for Men left behind in the bathroom.

Every day, Max rode the bus across the park to the west side where Lang and Straithern had their offices. He'd stare out the window at the wide sweep of Park Avenue, the PanAm building and the Helmsley Palace in the distance, and he'd feel like all the laws of physics had been magically repealed, like gravity didn't apply to him, like anything was possible. He made the mistake of mentioning it to his rock-star-wannabe roommate once, some night when a gig had been canceled and the guy had smoked so much weed he was too stoned to go out. The roommate had given him a dazed nod. "This city will fuck you up, man." When Max had explained he *liked* that zero gravity feeling, the guy had stared at him like he was the one who was high.

All these years later, Max had to wonder if maybe his stoner roommate hadn't been right. Because if anything could happen, then Joe could hate Max's guts and never forgive him. For the first time in his life, Max found himself wishing for something to be impossible.

He finally stopped walking, but not because he was tired. He'd just run out of real estate. Living on an island could be inconvenient that way. He stood at the railing of the Battery Park promenade and looked out over New York Harbor. It was clear for November, and he could see all the way to New Jersey. That was a dispiriting notion.

He briefly considered calling Dr. Tanner, asking for (or demanding, really, who was he kidding?) an emergency session. But she'd just listen blank-faced, her head tilted at that particular *I hear you and do not judge* angle. When he finished, she'd tell him to go talk to Joe. Max didn't need to pay her two hundred dollars to tell him something he already knew and didn't want to hear. Besides, his moping time was just about up. He had too much work waiting for him back at the office. No doubt at that very moment Judith was wondering where the hell he was.

Max walked back through the park and grabbed a cab. He started to give the address of the office but then hesitated. He didn't have an assistant, *again*, so there was no one to screen calls. He still didn't feel brave enough to talk to Joe.

He gave the cabbie his home address instead and pulled out his phone to call his company's receptionist. "This is Max. I'm, uh, not feeling well. I'll be working from home the rest of the day if anyone's looking for me."

There was a beat of silence, and then she said, "Are you all right, Mr. Tomlin? Should we, I don't know, bring over some medicine or chicken soup or something? I mean, are you okay to be by yourself? Maybe you should go to the doctor?"

"Oh, for—I'm not dying!" Max told her.

"Sorry! I didn't mean—" she stammered. "It's just I've worked here for five years, and you've never missed a day."

Max let out his breath, supposing this was what he got for being a workaholic. He said more patiently, "I'm just a little under

the weather. But it's nice of you to be concerned. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Feel better, Mr. Tomlin!" she chirped.

The taxi pulled up in front of Max's building. He pushed cash at the driver, barreled out of the cab, and ran headlong into Joe, who had apparently been skulking in the lobby, waiting to ambush him.

"Where the hell have you been?" Joe demanded, frowning at him. "And why haven't you been answering your damned phone?"

Max opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Joe grabbed him by the arm and pulled him inside, frogmarching him over to the elevator. Dwayne at the front desk raised an eyebrow at the sight of Max being dragged through the lobby of his own building but didn't rouse himself to do anything about it. If Max were ever being held under actual duress, God help him, because Dwayne certainly wouldn't. Joe hustled Max onto the elevator and stood there beside him, not saying a word, no doubt trying to torture Max with his silence.

By the fourth floor, Max cracked under the pressure. "I'm sorry! Okay? I should have known there was something wrong with Abby. I've never had an assistant who didn't want to put cyanide in my coffee. I know I fucked up today. And... yeah. *Really* sorry."

Joe stared at him, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Um," Max said belatedly. "Not that an apology makes up for screwing over your business, of course." Damn it. He really should have led with that. Even his instinct for building a persuasive argument had deserted him!

Joe shook his head. "You know, for a genius you can be surprisingly dumb sometimes."

"Hey!" Max said, because, okay, he'd screwed up. But that was no reason to malign his intelligence.

The elevator dinged at Max's floor, and Joe pulled him off the car and pushed him down the hall to his apartment.

"Come on. I said I was sorry!" Max protested. "Twice. That's two more times than I've said it in the last ten years."

"Just get inside," Joe told him.

Max sighed and pulled out his keys. Joe followed him into the apartment.

"Fine. We're alone now," Max said. "Yell. Punch me. Whatever you need to do." He hesitated. "Although if you're feeling fist-happy, I should mention I am something of a bleeder."

Joe grabbed the lapels of Max's jacket and hauled him in. Max flinched, but then Joe's mouth was on his, hot and sweet.

Max relaxed into him, murmuring in surprise against his lips, "Does this mean you don't hate me?"

"I don't hate you," Joe said, slowly and clearly, the way people talked to hopeless idiots.

Max might have taken offense if Joe hadn't been nibbling along his jaw, sending hot-cold shivers down his back.

"Wait." Max's brain finally caught up with him. "Does this mean we won the account?"

"Yep." Joe smiled against Max's neck. "Everybody on the board was really impressed. They liked that you weren't trying to put one over on us with meaningless dazzle. Thought it showed you had a real feel for our company and our values. Like he's one of us, they said. And they loved your big idea."

"I didn't fail miserably," Max said, the most profound relief of his life washing over him. "I'm still a genius!"

Joe kissed him, pressing closer. "Mmm. Yeah. Genius."

"People are always trying to say I've lost it," Max said. "But I've still got it."

“You’ve still got it,” Joe agreed. “Now let’s lose some clothes.” He went to work on the buttons of Max’s shirt.

“We’re going to be working together,” Max said happily, pulling Joe’s jacket off and getting a hand on his belt.

“Mmm,” Joe said, moving Max backwards toward the couch.

Max sprawled onto the cushions, and Joe clambered on top of him, running his hands up Max’s sides, kissing his neck.

Max pulled at Joe’s shirttails, inching greedy fingers under it. “We’re going to save your company,” he said.

Joe grinned. “And kick some Omnion ass.”

“How often do you come to New York?” Max brushed a flurry of kisses to Joe’s jaw. “Tell me it’s a lot. Because we can—I really want—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Joe finished unbuttoning Max’s shirt, pushed it out of the way, and kissed Max’s chest. “And when you come out to Montana, I can show you the mountains. Take you fly fishing, if you want.”

Max went still beneath him. “When I come out to Montana?”

Joe nodded, pulling off his own shirt and tossing it over his shoulder. “You know, for business.”

“In Montana? You can’t actually expect me to—”

Joe lifted his head and fixed a look on Max.

Max let out a heavy sigh. “Okay. Fine. But I’ll only be doing it for you.”

Joe kissed him and smiled. “I appreciate that. Now, let’s see if there isn’t something I can do for you.” He dove back in, peppering Max’s neck with kisses, slipping his hand into Max’s pants.

Max arched up, pressing into the touch. If he had to brave the wilds of Montana, it was reassuring to know that at least Joe would make it worth his while.

“I want to work with words!” That’s been LENORE BLACK’s ambition pretty much since she learned how to read. After trying out publishing and public relations, she took up a career as an advertising copy writer. Now, she’s happy to add “fiction writer” to the resume. Lenore lives in Brooklyn, New York, and spends the time commuting on the subway daydreaming about men who love each other... and sometimes about baseball.

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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Cover Design by Catt Ford

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Released in the United States of America
December 2009

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-291-2