

# **Bad Girls**

## **IV**

**By**  
**Michelle Carlyle**

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## **Dedication**

I would like to thank God for creating hot men like my husband. Thanks for the fuel for the Fantasy Machine in my head. Much appreciated!

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## The Industrial Saboteur

### Chapter One

Royce sat at his desk, trying to figure out where the error was in the latest plant projections. The noise in the background suddenly got his attention. The plant machinery didn't sound right. Since his office was located directly above the line, he'd grown accustomed to the normal sounds of the factory. Something was off. Even though it was technically lunch and the line was at half-speed—with half as many workers as normal—he could tell there was something wrong.

He turned around and checked the bank of cameras, which offered various vantage points of the complex machinery. Lunchtime was the only time when there weren't people stationed at every part of the line. Which was why he always took his lunch late, just in case there was a problem.

He inspected the twenty surveillance cameras one at a time, starting at the top and moving methodically through the monitors. As he scanned the top row of screens, something below on one of the monitors caught his attention.

It was a person. It looked like they were following the line closely. Below the twenty small screens was a large monitor. He hit the button to call up that particular camera onto the big monitor.

His gut wrenched. A woman, terrified, had her dress caught in the assembly line machinery and was being dragged along. She was headed for the choppers.

Leaping out of his chair, Royce flew out of his office, down the stairs and rushed to the scene. As he got closer, he heard her cries of desperation, but the machinery was drowning her out. Which was why no one had heard her.

Just as she approached the sharp blades that cut the cardboard, he slammed down the emergency shut-off switch. Just as a blade sliced through a part of her dress, the line ground to a halt.

She was nearly hysterical. Not to mention half-naked; her dress had been pulled almost completely off of her—jammed up in the assembly line. As alarmed as he was for her safety, he couldn't help but notice her long, muscular legs, her tight belly and her lovely bosom covered only by a lacey bra. Her rear end was also a sight to behold. Two high, rounded, taut buns were barely covered by a wisp of material. The sight made his loins stir.

He rushed to her side. "Calm down, calm down, you're going to be fine."

She cried out when she saw him and latched onto him. "You saved me! You saved me!" she squealed, nearly crushing him in an embrace.

He caught the scent of her long, blonde hair as she wrapped herself around him. She smelled wonderful. She was a little thing, too. Yes, he was a large man, but this woman was a mere slip of a girl. She couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, but the strength she used to cling to him was surprising.

He couldn't in all good conscience return her embrace. So he stood there awkwardly, his hands in the air, waiting for her to calm down. But it didn't seem as if that was going to happen any time soon. She was sobbing heavily.

He attempted to extricate himself from her, but she wouldn't let go. "Uh, Miss? I have to get your dress out of the machinery, or we'll be stuck here all day."

"You saved me! You saved me!" she cried as an answer, still crushing him in a hug.

"Miss," he said a bit louder. "I must get your dress out of the machinery."

She continued to sob and wouldn't let go.

Bob Jenkins, his floor manager, came rushing up to him. "Sir, sir! What..." He stopped and stared at the half-naked waif clinging to his boss.

Royce could feel his face flush. He shrugged and indicated that the woman would not let go of him.

Bob quickly understood the situation. Stifling a grin, he walked past the two and began working on the caught material in the machine assembly. Unable to pull the dress out, he withdrew a knife from his pocket and cut the material. The woman was free.

Royce patted her on the back. "Okay, you're free, you can let go now; you're going to be fine."

"You saved me! You saved me!" she cried, but would not let go.

Royce sent Bob a searching look. Bob shrugged, covered his mouth because he'd started laughing, and walked away, his shoulders shaking.

"For God's sake," Royce said.

Finally, with no way to extricate himself from the woman, he picked her up.

She moved her arms quickly to his neck. She got a near strangle hold on him and buried her face in his chest.

"You saved me! You saved me!" she cried.

Royce quickly carried her back to his office, kicking the door shut behind him. He walked over and tried to put her down on the couch, but she wouldn't let go.

"Miss, you're going to have to let go of me, please, you're choking me."

"I'm what?" she stammered.

"You're choking me," he said more loudly.

Finally, she seemed to come to her senses. "Oh. Oh! I'm so sorry!" she said, finally letting go.

Royce straightened up and loosened his collar. He could now breathe. He grabbed a blanket from the couch and threw it over her shoulders. She quickly wrapped it around herself.

She was still crying and shaking like a leaf. Royce got a bottle of water from his office refrigerator and handed it to her.

"Here, drink this, it'll make you feel better."

"I c-c-c-can't right now. In-n-n-n a m-m-minute." She shook so hard, he was worried she might come apart.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "You're fine. You'll be fine. Just calm down."

"I'm trying," she said, hugging the blanket tightly around herself.

He knew she must be in her early thirties, but she looked like a terrified child.

"Now tell me, who are you and how did you get your dress caught in that machine? No one's allowed near the line without the proper authority. And clothing, I might add."

"My name is Sophie McClain. I'm... I'm new."

"New. How new?"

"I s-s-s-started about a week ago."

"In which department?"

Her eyes grew wide as she stared up at him; tears began to roll down her cheeks again. "Am I going to get fired? Are you going to tell my boss? Please don't! I need this job! I can't lose this job! I can't! The agency said they won't send me on any more interviews! It's not my fault! It's not my fault!"

Royce held up a hand for her to quiet. "Please, Miss McClain, I'm not going to get you fired; I just want to know which department you work for."

"But the boss is real strict! They all said, don't cross Mr. Meyers. Don't even get near Mr. Meyers. Don't get in an elevator with Mr. Meyers or you



won't have a job by the time you reach the ground floor. You can't tell him! You can't tell him! I'll be fired, and I need this job!" she wailed.

"Miss McClain, please calm down."

His words had no effect. The woman was off and running.

"I haven't even met him," she babbled. "I don't know what he looks like. I've tried to avoid him because I heard he's real hard on people and I have this problem and bosses are always worried about me and I don't know why. I work real hard and I stay late and I get there early and then things happen and I always get blamed and it's not my fault. Well, maybe the truck going into that vat of cement was my fault, but why would they leave the truck open if they didn't expect people to get inside it? I'd never been in a truck that big before and it was really cool and I always just wanted to sit in a seat and look out because you can see so much in those trucks and who knew that the big lever in the center wasn't the gear shift but the brake? I mean who puts brake levers in the center of a truck? I just barely hit it and the thing started rolling and I barely jumped out in time—you'd think they'd be happy that I didn't die—but they weren't happy at all. They all screamed at me and ordered me out and almost didn't give me my last paycheck and my landlord is real strict about things like that. I was late once and he almost evicted me and my parents are dead and I don't have anyone in my corner to borrow money from and I can't live on the street! I couldn't make it on the street! Please don't tell! I won't go near the assembly line, I swear I won't!"

Royce stood there, stunned. When he finally became aware that his mouth hung open, he shut it. He'd never heard anyone talk that fast before, and he'd never met anyone like this person. The weird thing was, all he could think about was

kissing her to shut her up. How could he possibly be attracted to a disaster area like this young lady? But with those big blue eyes looking up at him, her make-up running down her cheeks, her full red lips quivering in fear, the woman sucked him in. Who was she? And how the hell did she end up at his plant?

She apparently took his stunned silence as judgment.

"Please don't tell!" she wailed, breaking down into tears.

"Miss McClain, please, stop your tears. I'm not going to fire you. I just want to know what department you work for."

"Ac-c-c-c-counts Receivable," she finally managed to squeak out through her tears.

"Finally, an answer. You work for Martha Higgins, right?"

"Uh-huh," she sniffed, wiping her tears on the blanket.

Royce got a box of Kleenex and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said.

"So how did you come to be stuck in that machinery? Your department is at the furthest end of this building. Didn't Martha tell you that this area is off limits to everyone but the workers who run the line? That machinery is very dangerous, Miss McClain."

"Oh, I know, but I wanted to see. I love machinery. My dad used to be a mechanic and I used to go to the auto plant where he worked in Michigan—we used to live in Michigan before all the plants closed—and he let me watch him and I really liked it and I love machinery and I just wanted to look."

"I see. So during your lunch break, you walked down here to get yourself a look. Why didn't you just watch from the windows above the line?"

"Well, I did, but then there was this gizmo that took the cardboard and folded it and it was really cool and I didn't understand exactly how it folded it and I couldn't really see from up there and it was lunch and no one was around so I..."

"So you came down to get a closer look."

"Uh-huh. But then, I don't know what happened, I must've got too close when I was checking that foldy thingy and the next thing I knew, the machine was practically strangling me and I was being dragged along and I couldn't rip my dress off or get untangled and I thought I was gonna die and then you saved me! God, how can I ever thank you for saving my life? Can I cook you dinner? I don't have any money to buy you a gift or anything, but I'm a real good cook. I can make all kinds of things—my favorite is spinach enchiladas—and I make my own sauce to go on top because canned sauce is just nasty."

Royce couldn't believe how much information she could impart in such a short period of time. "Uh..." he said.

"Just please, please, please don't tell Mr. Meyers because I didn't mean any harm and I know I broke the rules but the foldy thing was so cool, I just couldn't help myself but I didn't mean anything. I was just curious. And I heard that—"

"Yes, yes, that Mr. Meyers is a tyrant. Well, he's not a tyrant, I can tell you that, and he wouldn't fire someone for their first mistake, just make sure this doesn't become a practice of yours. All right?"

"Oh, no. I'll never get that close to the machinery again."

"Good girl," he said with a sigh. This little girl was a tornado! "Well, now that's settled. You need

to go home and get some suitable clothes. In the meantime, I have a pair of coveralls that should suffice," he said, walking to a corner of his office and opening up a closet. He withdrew a pair of coveralls and tossed them to her. "Now put those on. You'll have to roll up the sleeves and the legs, but at least you won't have to walk through the plant half-naked."

"Thanks," she said, brightly. She flashed him a white-toothed smile that almost made his heart stop. My God, what a beautiful little thing.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Um... on the corner of Middlefield and Jefferson. In that big apartment complex."

"Yes, I know the area. Now, I'm a bit concerned about you driving after you had such a shock... what time is it? Oh, good, lunch is almost over. I was going to call you a cab, but since it's time for me to go eat, and one of my favorite restaurants is near your apartment, how about if I drive you home so you can get dressed?"

"Okay. Just don't let Mr. Meyers know I took all this time off, because he's—"

"He is *not* a tyrant. He'll understand."

"I hope so. I really can't lose this job because—"

"Your parents are dead, the agency won't send you out on any more jobs, and you don't want to end up on the street. Yes, you said that."

"I did? Oh, I did. Sorry, I forget what I say when I'm shook up. Every time I've almost died, I'm like this."

"*Every time you've almost died?* How many times has that been?"

"Uh... I don't know. Ten or twelve?"

"Ten or twelve times? And you haven't learned from your mistakes?"

"Oh, yeah, I have. I won't ever roller-skate in parking garages, or get into big trucks near vats of

cement, or ride a shopping cart down a hill or jump off a roof with an umbrella like Mary Poppins—of course, I was six at the time, so kids do stupid things like that, so that technically doesn't count—nor will I snorkel in shark-infested waters when there's big signs that say not to, nor will I ghost ride in my car, nor will I try to ride a bike without any hands, nor will I—"

"Stop. I got it. I got the picture. You never make the same mistake twice. You just..."

"It's not my fault if I'm curious."

"No, but it seems as if you need a healthy dose of self-restraint."

"Oh. Yeah. Don't have much of that."

"Apparently."

"I haven't almost died in... well, there was that truck thing. Okay, that truck thing was the first time in over two years that I almost died. Wait. That was the second time I almost died in a truck. I forgot about that. Okay, thirteen times I almost died. No, wait. There was that time with the skateboard and the windsurfing board thing. But who knew the wind gusts were so strong that day?"

"My God. How old are you?"

"Thirty-three. Almost thirty-four."

"It's amazing you're still alive. What does your husband say about this?"

"Nothing. He's dead."

"He's what?"

She immediately said, "I didn't do it—"

"I didn't mean to imply that—"

"He did that all by himself. He was motorcycle riding and went off a cliff which he thought was a hill and it was but he thought the other side of the hill was a valley and it was but it happened to be a hundred and fifty feet down. That was five years ago. I miss him all kinds and haven't found anyone as good and as nice as him, so now I'm single."

Royce couldn't believe how charmed he was by this woman. While a fruitcake and a ball of energy, he'd never met anyone quite like her. For some reason, aside from her verbal avalanches, he found himself enchanted by her.

"Well, Miss McClain, how about if I take you home so you can change into something more suitable?"

"Okay, just can I call Miss Higgins and tell her that I'm... wait. She won't believe me, I'm already late back to the office and I have this whole pile of things I need to get done by the end of the—"

"I'll call and explain it to her."

"Okay. Thanks."

He chuckled to himself and picked up the phone and called Martha. "Martha? Yes, it's me. I have an employee of yours here with me—yes, Miss McClain. She's fine. She had a slight accident with some machinery—I explained that to her. Yes, it's fine, she's fine, but I'm afraid her clothes are not. Her dress got caught in the assembly line. No problem. We've had a long chat about it. At any rate, her clothes got destroyed, and I'm taking my lunch now. She informed me that her apartment is nearby a favorite restaurant of mine, so I'm going to take her home—she's still a bit shaky—and we'll be back in an hour and a half or so. Can you do without her for that long? Excellent. She was very concerned about letting you down. Yes, she is. Yes, she does. No, it's all fine. Thank you, Martha." He hung up the phone.

"She's okay with it?" Sophie asked.

"Yes. Now, before we go, I want to make one thing clear. You are not to go near that machinery again, all right? This time, I'm letting you off with a warning. Next time, you may not be so lucky. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, sure, you betcha, I won't, I promise. But you aren't going to tell that nasty Mr. Meyers are you?"

"Who told you Mr. Meyers was such a demon?"

"This girl who sits next to me."

"Let me guess. Sherrill Mannis."

"Yeah, how did you know?" Sophie asked.

"Oh, she's had a few run-ins with Mr. Meyers. She probably didn't mention that she was slacking off, sneaking out to spend time with one of the workers in the auto shop."

"No. She didn't. She just said he was mean and that I should avoid him."

"I'm sure."

Suddenly, Sophie noticed something on Royce's desk and gasped in horror.

"What?" Royce demanded.

"We're in his office! Mr. Meyers's office! You have to get me out of here! What if he comes back and sees—oh, God, he's going to think I was coming on to you! I'm going to be fired! I'm—"

"Sophie! Quiet!" he ordered.

She instantly quieted, but still looked terrified. "But—"

"Quiet, now, just quiet. Damn, woman, do you ever calm down?"

"Yeah," she answered, looking sheepish. She still kept looking between his nameplate on his desk and the door. It was clear she wasn't convinced that "Mr. Meyers" wasn't going to come rushing in the door and fire her.

This woman was exhausting. He was afraid if he told her who he was, she'd scream and run.

"Calm down and come along, now," he said gesturing towards the door.

"Okay," she said.

Royce escorted her through the factory, towards his private parking space behind the back of the warehouse.

He finally took hold of her arm because she kept stopping to stare at the working machinery. He'd never seen a woman more fascinated with the assembly line before.

They were just about out the door when Bob Jenkins stopped him. "Sir, there's a problem with a customer. He's on the phone, and he wants to talk to you."

"Where's the nearest phone?" Royce asked.

"My office, sir," Bob said, indicating the small office off in the corner of the warehouse.

"All right. Now, Sophie, you stay here, and you don't touch anything, do you hear me?"

Sophie was intently staring at an opening in the wall that the assembly line passed through. It took the sheets of cardboard into the printing room.

"Sophie!"

"Huh? What?"

"Stay here and don't touch anything! You hear me?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, I won't."

"Good. I'll be right back."

"Okie-dokie," she said, and turned her attentions back to the machinery.

Five minutes later, the problem solved, Royce walked back into the factory and didn't see Sophie anywhere.

He heard a little shriek, looked over, and was completely horrified to see Sophie riding a piece of cardboard on top of the conveyor belt, going through the opening in the wall, headed towards the printing press.

Royce ran down the hallway and smashed down on the emergency control lever. He flew through the double doors to see five workers desperately trying



to extricate Sophie from underneath the massive press. If he'd been two seconds late turning off the line, Sophie would have been crushed.

She cried hysterically while the five men tried to calm her down and get her off the conveyor belt.

As Royce neared the scene, he heard her yell, "Don't tell Mr. Meyers! I'll lose my job! I need this job! It wasn't my fault!"

This time, because he'd already formed some sort of an attachment to the girl, he was furious. He could feel his blood rushing in his ears. All he could think about was spanking her into the middle of the next week.

Which was an excellent idea. Obviously, her near death experiences had no effect on her self-control. But a good solid paddling might just get through to her. It had worked on his ex-wife; she'd stopped all her shenanigans after he'd put the wood to her. Of course, his ex-wife's fiascos were completely innocuous next to Sophie's disasters. Miss McClain needed a keeper! And one with a strong hand. He had a feeling that he might be just the man for the job.

Just as he got next to the line, two men got her off the conveyor belt. She was still crying and wailing about her need to keep her job.

"Boss, this girl, she—"

"Don't worry, Joe, I know. I'll take care of this."

As soon as she saw Royce, she rushed to his arms. "I'm sorry!" she wailed as she embraced him.

This time, he pushed her away, hard, grabbed her by the arm and dragged her away from the machine. With her sobbing and crying and begging him not to tell "Mr. Meyers," he pulled her along with him to a place where he knew they'd get some privacy; the storeroom next to Bob's office.

He took her inside, slammed the door, pulled her over to a chair sitting in a corner and sat down.

He yanked her down across his lap and began spanking the bejeesus out of her. As to be expected, she tried to fight him, but he increased his hold on her and whaled on her tight, little behind. He just wished that she wasn't wearing coveralls because all he wanted to do was to spank her bare bottom until it was redder than a beet.

All he could see was her lying on that conveyor belt, that press about to obliterate her head. She'd been two seconds away from death!

As he spanked her and spanked her, he became aware of something. He really liked this woman. Some part of him had planned on dating her. Some part of him had already considered them to be a couple. To have her almost die on him made him crazy. And he'd just met her! What was it about her? Was it true? Had he already fallen in love with her? That fast?

Well, he didn't know. But he did know one thing; from here on out, she was going to listen to him. From here on out, the little troublemaker was going to obey him. He'd make sure of that.

One bun than the other, he spanked her hard. Then, as a finishing touch, he swatted her sit spots with all he had. She shrieked with pain.

Finally, when it was clear she'd taken all she could, he stopped. He pulled her up and sat her on his lap. She was crying so loudly, she nearly deafened him.

"Sophie, stop!"

When she wouldn't, he did the only thing he could think to do to shut her up. He kissed her.

## The Industrial Saboteur

### Chapter Two

In complete shock, Sophie found herself kissing the most handsome man in the world. Not only that, he'd just spanked the hell out of her. And before that, she'd almost died twice in the cardboard box manufacturing equipment. Which was why he'd spanked her. He'd told her not to go near it that second time, but the machinery was so fascinating, she couldn't help herself.

She'd only climbed the ladder a bit, to get a better view. But unfortunately, she'd tripped on her pant leg and fell onto the moving conveyor belt. Right when that massive press had almost crushed her head, the machinery stopped. After those nice men got her off the conveyor belt, Mr. Handsome had arrived. It was then he dragged her to this storeroom, turned her over his knee and spanked the tar out of her. A complete over-reaction, she was sure.

None of this was really her fault. The coveralls he'd given her after she'd lost her dress in that first accident were too big. If the coveralls had been a bit smaller, she never would have slipped on that ladder rung.

She had to admit that she'd disobeyed him. He was taking her home to get her a change of clothes, but had been stopped by one of the foremen. He told her to wait and not to touch anything, but she only wanted to get a better look. Sophie had no death wish.

But the weirdest thing, after he'd spanked her, he'd pulled her up into his lap. She couldn't help but cry—he'd annihilated her rear—and when she wouldn't quiet down, he'd kissed her to shut her up. While her butt was still on fire, she almost didn't notice, the kiss was completely blowing her mind.

The really weird thing was that she didn't even know the man's name. She'd only been working at Meyers Packaging for a week, and she barely knew anyone. Today had been the first day she'd ventured away from the accounting office. When she saw the machinery, she was so excited, she'd rushed to check it out. While she knew she wasn't supposed to—warnings were clearly posted—she figured a quick peek couldn't hurt. She was busy checking out this folding device on the assembly line when her dress got caught, and she got pulled along on the conveyor belt and was headed to the chopping blades when this amazingly handsome man saved her.

He was tall, very tall, at least six foot five, and had sandy blonde hair graying at the temples. He had a longish nose, a really strong jaw and these piercing blue eyes. He was beautiful.

She wondered who this hunk was. Some sort of supervisor, she assumed by the way the men treated him. She just hoped he wouldn't turn her in to Mr. Meyers, the boss. She'd heard all kinds of rumors about how tough the big man was. They all said that if you got onto an elevator with the man, you wouldn't have a job by the time you got to the ground floor. He was that scary.

And at this point, Sophie couldn't lose another job. The agency told her if this one didn't work out, she was on her own. She just barely had enough money until payday. If she lost this job, she'd lose her apartment, her car and would be out on the streets. She prayed this guy liked her enough to protect her from Mr. Meyers.

He sure seemed like he liked her, the way he was kissing her. Of course, he'd been furious with her. That spanking was terrible. But if he was now kissing her, that must mean that he liked her. Which would be amazing. She hadn't found anyone

she liked since her husband George died in that motorcycle accident five years before. To be kissed and held again felt so good. Even with her buns burning the way they were.

He finally pulled away, and she could only stare at him in shock.

He smiled, reached up and wiped away her tears. "There," he said. "Good. I was afraid Bob would come rushing in here the way you were wailing. Now, you, listen to me. From here on out, you will obey me to the letter of the law I set down for you. If I tell you not to get near that machinery, you will listen to me. If you don't, next time, I'll pull those pants and panties right off of you and paddle you bare-bottomed. You hear me?"

"I hear you, I hear you."

"This is the second time you almost died today. If I hadn't stopped that machine when I did, you wouldn't be here. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah. And thanks, thanks so much," she said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He tasted so good and his cologne was so wonderful.

He chuckled deep in his throat and kissed her back.

She pulled away and sighed. "Wow, you are a really good kisser."

He grinned at her. He was so handsome when he smiled! She was briefly overcome by those blue eyes of his. He was so hot!

"Okay, then, you'll listen to me now?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure I will. You bet. I don't want to be spanked anymore."

"I'd hope that you wouldn't want to flirt with death, either."

"No, just you," she said, grinning at him.

He laughed, set her on her feet and got up. "All right, you, now we're going to get you home so you can change."

"Good, these coveralls don't fit me very well. See, these were the whole reason I fell onto that conveyor belt. I slipped on the rung of that ladder because the pant leg came undone. Too bad you didn't have any smaller coveralls, or I wouldn't have fallen."

He glared down at her with a disapproving stare. "Please don't tell me you're blaming your accident on me."

Maybe it wasn't the best time to do that. She looked away. "Well... no..."

"You are!" he exclaimed. "Somehow, you've turned this all around in your mind to blame those coveralls!"

"Well, no. But I wouldn't have slipped if I hadn't been wearing them."

His brow furrowed, he glared down at her. "Do I have to spank you again?"

"No! No," she said, protecting her rear end. "No, okay, if I'd stayed away from the machinery like you asked, I wouldn't have gotten hurt."

He sighed, clearly exasperated with her. "Yes. That is the reason you fell onto the conveyor belt, not the damned coveralls."

"I guess you're right."

"You guess?" he demanded. "Maybe I do have to spank you to—"

"No! My ass is burning enough, please. No, no more spanking. You're right. It was all my fault. I won't go near that machinery again, I promise. Just please, please, please don't tell Mr. Meyers. I—"

"Can't lose your job or you'll be out on the streets. Yes, you told me."

"Yeah..."

"All right. Let's go," he said, opening up the door.

She walked out; he followed. He grabbed her by the arm—probably worried she might lunge at the machinery or something—and escorted her outside the warehouse to a small parking lot. Only a few places were there, and all of them had names on the spaces. For the important people.

What was weird was that he was parked in the space that was for Mr. Meyers. Mr. Meyers must have gone somewhere because Mr. Handsome had been using his office earlier, too. Hmm. He must be pretty high up in the company. Good, maybe he could protect her from that nasty Mr. Meyers.

He opened the door for her, and she got in. It was a really nice car. A Mercedes, she thought. It had leather seats and a wooden dashboard. Really fancy. He must make good money to afford such a car. Maybe he was borrowing it from someone.

When they got underway, she started talking. Mainly because she was so nervous. The man was so cute! She rattled on about cars, the weather, the movies she'd seen lately.

His cell phone rang, and he answered it. "Royce Meyers here," he said. "Yes, I'll be back in about an hour. We'll meet then. Oh, good, I'm glad. No damage at all? Lucky, very lucky. Thanks, Bob."

It took a good long minute for the information to soak in. She looked over at him, the pit of her stomach dropped to the floorboards. Royce Meyers. That was Mr. Meyers's full name. Mr. Handsome was Mr. Meyers? The Mr. Meyers? The horrible tyrant that everyone was so afraid of? That was the guy that saved her? Twice? And spanked her? The top boss? The owner of the whole company?

Petrified, no words would come out. She stared at him for a moment and then forcibly shifted her

gaze straight ahead. She had to get out of the car. He was going to fire her.

Oh, my God, she'd kissed the boss! She'd upset the boss! She'd disobeyed the boss! She'd caused two industrial accidents right in front of the top boss! Her life was over!

She didn't know what to do, what to say. She'd never blown it this bad in her entire life! Well, almost, but not like this. What was she going to do?

"Sophie?" he asked.

She couldn't respond. She didn't know what to say. She stared straight ahead and pretended she hadn't heard him. All she wanted to do was run. As far away as she could. How was she going to make her rent? Where would she work? She was dead! Dead!

"Sophie? Are you all right?"

She couldn't look at him. She hoped he'd forget she was in the car. Maybe he'd drop her off at her house, and she'd never have to see him again.

She could work at McDonald's maybe. She could sell her wedding ring; that would give her enough rent and food until she could get another job. She could sell her easel. Desperate times called for desperate measures. All the things she swore she'd never do, she might have to do now.

"Sophie, what's wrong? Say something, I'm worried."

She tried to think of something to say. Anything! Say something! "Uh," she squeaked. She cleared her throat. "Uh... nothing."

"It is not nothing. You were talking a mile a minute, and now you can't seem to speak. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm fine."

"It's not nothing. Talk to me. What's going on?" Royce demanded

"I'm fine, sir."



"Sir? What's happened to you?"

"Nothing, sir. I'm fine, sir. My apartment is coming up in the next block, sir. You may drop me off anywhere."

"What is wrong with you, woman?" he demanded. "You were chatting at me—a verbal torrent, I might add—and now you look terrified, will barely speak to me and are addressing me so formally. What's wrong?"

He pulled over to the curb, just down from her apartment. He stopped the car and shut off the engine.

She couldn't face the man; she couldn't. He was going to fire her. Well, it was inevitable. She'd make it easy on him. She'd already tortured him enough.

"Now tell me, Sophie, what's wrong?" he said in a soft, kind tone.

She still couldn't look at him. She was frozen there. *Move!*

"Sophie, look at me."

She couldn't move.

"Sophie?" He reached over, touched her chin and turned her to face him. "Sophie?"

"I'm sorry!" she yelled, startling the hell out of him. "I'm sorry, I ruined your plant, and you're going to fire me! I'm sorry! I quit! I quit! I'll mail the coveralls back to you! I quit!" She leapt out of the car and ran full speed for her apartment.

She heard him call out behind her, but she was so terrified, she didn't stop. The pant legs unrolled, she tripped, managed to recover and kept going.

She reached her apartment stairs, took them two at a time, raced to her apartment and realized that her keys were in her purse, back at the office.

She stopped and stared at her apartment door, stunned. Terror filled her. Now what? She had to hide!

She leapt to the window that led to her kitchen. She took off the screen, pushed on the window, and thank the Lord, she hadn't closed it properly.

The window slid open just enough for her to get through. She heaved herself up and pushed herself inside.

Unfortunately, just as she got half of her body inside, the coveralls got snagged on something. She was stuck! She pushed and pushed, but couldn't get untangled. What was she going to do?

"Sophie?" came a voice from right behind her. Mr. Meyers!

She screamed a loud and deafening scream of abject terror. But she couldn't run; she was just stuck there, half inside and half outside the window. This was terrible!

"My God, woman, what is wrong with you?!" he demanded. "Stop screaming, for God's sake. You'll alert the entire neighborhood!"

Sophie hung there, too afraid to move.

"Sophie?"

She pretended to be somewhere else.

"Sophie McClain, you answer me. What is wrong with you?" he commanded in a stern tone.

"You're going to fire me! You're the boss! I didn't know you were the boss! I quit! I quit! Please don't sue me! I didn't mean to hurt your plant!"

Whack! He spanked her a good one. It hurt!

"Ow!"

"Now you listen to me, you stop all this nonsense, immediately, you hear me? If you don't want a bunch more like that, you'll calm down."

"You're going to fire me, and I'm going to die all alone out on the streets!"

Rapid fire, the man began spanking her.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"You will stop this nonsense, woman!" he ordered.

"I'm gonna lose my car and my whole life!" she wailed.

He continued spanking her; he seemed really frustrated with her. But she didn't care about that. This hurt! This was terrible! Her boss was spanking her, and she couldn't get away; she was stuck on the window, defenseless. And besides, he'd made mincemeat out of her butt just a half hour before. This was doubly painful.

"I (spank) am not (spank) going to fire you (spank)! Now just calm the hell down and shut up!" Whack, whack, whack!

"Okay! Okay! You're not going to fire me! I get it! Owwww!"

"Finally!" he said, and he stopped. But then he must have rethought things because he swatted her a couple extra for good measure.

"Frustrating woman! Now, get off of there," he said.

"I can't. I'm stuck. Help me get through."

"For pity's sake, you are a problem, woman. Here," he took her by the waist and lifted her—along with the coveralls—off the snag and pushed her inside.

She dropped onto the floor with a crash. Now what was she going to do? Maybe he'd forget she was there. Maybe he'd get back in his car and—

"Sophie, open this door immediately," came his stern and commanding order.

Well, there went that plan. She hesitantly got up and opened the door. She couldn't even look at him.

"May I come in?" he asked in an impatient tone.

"Oh... uh, yeah. Sure..." she said, backing up, sniffing and rubbing her sore behind. Then she realized that her apartment was a mess. She had paintings everywhere, sketches, her living room looked like an artist's nightmare. "Oh, God!" she

exclaimed. She rushed about, clearing space on her couch. "Sorry, this is a mess!"

"Sophie, that's fine. That's enough room to sit. Go change," he said.

"But you're going to fire me, really, aren't you?" she asked forlornly.

"For God's sake, will you stop reacting to your own vivid, wild and crazy imagination, for one second, woman? You are not fired; you are not about to be thrown out of here; you have a job; you will be paid; you won't end up on the streets, just go in there and change. I have to eat and get back to the office, all right?"

She stood there, staring at him in disbelief for a good minute.

"Sophie?" he asked again, this time it was clear he was exasperated.

"Okay, yeah, fine. Sorry, be right back," she forced out.

She practically had to drag herself by her own collar to her bedroom to change. She was totally freaked out and could not get over her terror of the man. The stories upon stories she heard about him! Ever since she got there, all her coworkers had tormented her with lurid descriptions of people's firings at the hands of the dreaded Mr. Meyers. He'd become some sort of abominable snowman to her. A monster.

But this monster sure kissed nice. And spanked hard. And for some reason, he hadn't fired her. And by all rights, she'd certainly given him more than enough cause. He'd seen her at her worst, yet he wasn't firing her. She couldn't get her head around this. Maybe this was a different Mr. Meyers. Maybe he was the son, and the bad guy was his father. Maybe she'd misinterpreted the whole thing.

That spanking, though. This was a man who didn't take guff from people. This could, indeed, be

the dreaded Mr. Meyers. What did they call him? Something terrible. Something frightening. A ripple of terror raced through her. She had to keep it together. She had to have this job.

"Sophie? Could you please get a move on, here?"

"Oh, sure. Sorry!" She quickly changed into another dress. Unfortunately, this one was kinda dressy; all her work clothes were dirty. She threw on some shoes and raced into the living room.

Mr. Meyers was staring at a painting of hers. Probably wondering why the Art Police hadn't come in to stop her. Sure, she liked her work, and she'd gotten a few awards and stuff, but she was no Picasso.

"Did you do these?" he asked when she came into the room. He did a double take on her. He began staring at her dress.

"Do you hate it? I can change, I just don't have any more work clothes because I ran out of quarters and the change machine is broken in the laundry area and everything is dirty and I ruined that last really good suitable dress and this is all I have. Is it too dressy? You hate it, huh? I—"

"Sophie!"

"What?"

"You're supposed to allow time for a person to answer you when you ask them a question. You are not supposed to answer for them."

"Oh. Sorry. You terrify me."

He sighed. "God, those rumors. Yes, yes, I've heard them. There were only a few instances where I had to put the fear of God into people, and you'd think I was Godzilla."

"That's what they call you!" she cried exuberantly. When she saw the look on his face, she stopped smiling. "I'm sorry. I just couldn't

remember what they called you and I was in there, trying to remember and... sorry."

He started to say something, but finally gave up. He sighed heavily and returned to the painting. "Did you do this?"

"Yes."

"All of these?" he asked, gesturing around the living room.

"Uh, yeah."

"Even the oils on the walls?"

"Uh, yeah. Those I did a few years ago, when I was into oils. Now... well, it's kinda pricey, working in oils. Watercolors are cheaper and go further and the paper is cheaper than canvases, so now I'm doing watercolors. But I intend to go back to the oils as soon as I have enough money. Why? You hate them, don't you?"

"No, why would you think that? These are beautiful. I'm stunned, really. I just... I had no idea you... these are magnificent, really."

It was clear he meant it. She felt a bolt of joy race through her; her toes and feet tingled with delight. He liked them! He actually liked her work!

He broke into a wide smile at her reaction. Her heart skipped a beat. He was so handsome!

"Sophie, you're an amazingly talented artist. Why aren't you doing this full-time?"

"Because I have this affinity for a roof over my head and food. I'm picky that way."

He laughed. "No, really."

"No, really. I tried. After art school, I took my stuff everywhere. Got in a couple galleries, made enough money for a new microwave and that was about it. That was when I was with George. He supported me for a long time while I tried to get paid for painting. And then George died and I didn't feel like painting for a year. By that time, I was all out of the life insurance money and had to get a

job. That was four years ago. Now I just paint for myself."

"You should be doing this full-time."

"Love to, but unfortunately, there's only me. My parents died when I was in college, I'm an only child, my parents were only children, I don't have anyone. So, I just paint for me. End of story. You want to go eat? I can eat here and then you can pick me up afterwards."

"Sophie, you're coming with me."

"But I don't have any money until payday and—"

"Sophie, I'm paying."

"But I can't pay you back and—"

"Sophie, it's my treat."

She stood there and stared at him. No one had taken her out to eat since George. She couldn't remember the last time she was even in a restaurant that didn't have a drive-through window.

"Sophie?"

"Uh, okay. I'll just get my... oh, it's at the office. Okay, let's go, I guess," she said, nervously.

Sophie found herself in a fancy restaurant with white linen tablecloths, cloth napkins and wine glasses that had ice water in them. It had been so long, she tried not to stare at everything.

"Have you decided what you're going to eat?" he asked.

She'd looked at the menu, but everything was so much money. "Uh..."

"If you pick something under twenty-five dollars, I'll spank you."

She looked up at him, shocked. He was grinning at her.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Sorry. I've... it's... this is just weird. I haven't been in a restaurant in over five years. Well, a nice one. This just feels so wrong."

"Why?"

"Uh, let's see. Is it because I almost single-handedly destroyed the plant today? Or is it because you're the boss and I'm a new employee? Or is it because I haven't been around a man I've been attracted to in... oh! I'll have the chicken and mushroom in wine sauce." She looked down at her lap.

He burst out laughing. "My God, woman, you are the funniest, cutest, quite probably the most desirable woman I've met in years. Where the hell did you come from?"

"Flint, Michigan?"

He laughed until he was nearly belly laughing. "Adorable. You are just adorable," he said.

She couldn't quite figure it all out, but she knew one thing, she was happy.

He ordered for them because she couldn't find her voice. She sat there awkwardly, picking at the tablecloth while they waited for their food.

"So, why aren't you a graphic artist?"

"Didn't like it. I don't like to confuse the two things: art and work. I just want to paint what I want to paint. And I'm good with numbers."

His eyes twinkled at her. "You are?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, good, I'm very glad you came to work for me."

"Uh... me, too."

"So I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Tomorrow's Friday. Will you allow me to take you out?"

"A date?!" she practically screamed. Many people looked towards their table. "Sorry. A date?"

"You don't want to?"

"No, no I do, but you're the boss."

"Yes, I am. So I'd like to keep this between just us two for now, all right?"



"Sure."

"So, how about seven-thirty?"

"Sure."

He smiled. "Excellent."

They got back to the office, and Sophie sat at her desk, staring at her computer screen, unable to process the day.

"Don't think you're all special," said Sherrill from the next cubicle.

"What?"

"Don't think you're special. Meyers makes passes at all the girls. He thinks we're his own personal possessions."

"What?" Sophie demanded.

"If you don't believe me, follow me to his office. You can watch from the assembly line floor. He wants to see me, and I know what he wants," Sherrill said snidely.

"You're lying!"

Sherrill smiled an evil smile. "Follow me, if you don't believe me."

"Maybe I will."

Sophie snuck into the assembly line room and hid in between two conveyor belts where she could get a view of Royce's office. She waited. Then Sherrill came into view. No more than two seconds later, it happened. Her heart sank. Royce was all over Sherrill. So it was true!

It was then that Sophie felt a tug at the back of her dress. She turned and couldn't believe it. Her dress was caught in the machinery!

## The Industrial Saboteur

### Chapter Three

Royce sat at his office desk, absently staring out the window. All he could think about was that kiss. Who would have thought when he got up that morning, he'd be falling in love? He smiled. Sophie McClain was so beautiful. Those huge blue eyes, her long blonde hair, that pert little nose—not to mention that amazing body—she was perfect.

Well, perfect in a disaster-area sort of way. The woman was a human catastrophe. He'd never had an employee—anyone for that matter—get caught in the machinery twice in one day.

His gut twisted when he thought of her being pulled along toward the cardboard choppers. Or when she almost got crushed with the massive printing press. Too close. She was not someone who could be trusted near any large machines. Too bad she was so fascinated with them. Like a moth to a flame, the woman couldn't seem to help herself around the machinery.

No matter. He'd already decided. After some dating, he'd fire her and rehire her as his wife. His grin widened. Finally, someone fun and interesting and different. Alive. And she was such an amazing artist. He couldn't wait to set up an art studio for her in his house. Their house. The thought warmed him all the way to his toes. He'd been too lonely of late. Far too lonely.

He thought back over their lunch just an hour before. She sat there—in the prettiest flower-printed dress he'd ever seen—beaming at him. She liked him; there was no doubt about that. He couldn't wait until their date the next night.

He was daydreaming about Sophie's lithe naked body intertwined with his when someone knocked on his door.

He shook himself out of it and forced his half-shaft to go away. "Yes?"

It was Sherrill Mannis. He couldn't stand the woman, but she did good work when she actually sat at her desk long enough to complete some. He'd had to reprimand her the month before, she'd been stealing out to the auto shop. Apparently, she was having a fling with a mechanic.

"Yes, Sherrill? How can I help you?"

"Oh, sir. You wanted these reports—oh!"

Suddenly, the woman was dripping with coffee. He hadn't even seen the cup in her hand. But she'd spilled it all down her front.

He grabbed a box of Kleenex and raced around his desk to help her. She took the tissues and began cleaning herself. He helped mop up the non-sexual parts of her.

All of a sudden, she fell towards him. He caught her. She looked up at him with a strange look in her eye. He couldn't decipher it.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I got dizzy."

He helped her to his couch. "Should I call a doctor?" he asked.

"No, no," Sherrill said, fanning her face. "I'll be fine."

"What's wrong? Have you been sick?"

"No... I just... No. Must not have eaten enough at lunch, I suppose."

"Well, a proper diet is essential to clear thinking," he offered.

"Well, I'm feeling much better now. I'd better get back to work."

"Oh, where are those reports? Wait. I don't remember requesting reports from you," Royce said.

"I was sure it was you who... oh, my gosh! I'm so sorry. It was Bob Jenkins who needed these reports. I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong

with me today. I'll make sure to make an appointment with my doctor. If you'll excuse me."

Sherrill got up, looking very clear-headed for someone who was supposedly sick. She sent him a half-smile and left his office.

Royce was completely baffled. That was the oddest exchange he'd had with the woman. Of course, the last time he'd spoken to her, he'd given her one hell of a dressing down. But that whole encounter just now had been really strange.

Well, no matter. He had pressing work to do. He sat down at his desk and pulled up some files on his computer. He slowly became aware that the machinery below him sounded strange.

He heard a weird clanking sound followed by a screeching. That wasn't right! He leapt to his feet and headed for the assembly room floor.

When he landed at the base of the stairs, he heard a terrible sound. Alarms began to sound. The line was shut down.

Bob Jenkins, his floor manager, came running down the aisle towards him. "Something's caught in the machine, sir. I don't know what. All of a sudden, it got jammed in the chopper, one of the blades busted and now the entire thing is off kilter. We have to shut down the line to fix it."

"Oh, for God's sake, this timing couldn't be worse. We're already late for that shipment to Associated Foods. What am I going to tell them? Well, no matter. Bob, fix it as soon as you can. Damn this. We may have to work Saturday if we can't fix this fast."

"I've got all the mechanics on the problem, sir."

"Good man. Let me know what it was when you find out. We can't afford shut downs like this."

"I know, sir."

Royce sat in his office, which felt far too quiet. Without the machines running, the silence was

completely distracting. Besides that, he knew every minute of silence was costing him huge amounts of money. Thank the Lord his father was gone. When the old man was still alive, if the line had shut down for anything, there would have been massive firings. The old man did not know how to keep employees. Yes, it was good to keep a tight control, yes, they needed to fear the boss a bit, but they weren't supposed to be terrified of you.

Which was why all those rumors flying around the plant bothered him. Royce was no hatchet man. He was nothing like his father. But, still, somehow he'd gotten the nickname of Godzilla. It infuriated him. Especially in light of his day with Sophie. Once she'd found out who he was, she'd nearly keeled over with fright. It had taken a lot of fancy footwork for her to trust him.

He knew that Sherrill had a lot to do with it. She'd probably filled poor Sophie's head with lurid tales of his cruelty.

So why had Sherrill just been to his office? He knew she hated him, why would she stop by, especially by accident? He'd have thought she'd be trying to avoid all contact with him. Oh, who knew? What mattered now was getting that machinery up and running.

A half and hour later, he heard the machinery start up again. Thank the Lord! They might actually be able to make their delivery on time. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Bob Jenkins appeared at his door.

"Bob, come in. Did you find out what jammed the machine? Was it a miss-fed piece of cardboard or—what is that?"

Bob had a piece of material in his hand. It was a piece of a flower-colored material. Royce felt smacked square between the eyes. He'd just been dreaming about that material. It was from Sophie's

pretty dress. He quickly lost his mind. Of course, she was the culprit! He was going to wring her neck!

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After Sophie had cried in the bathroom, she forced herself to get it together. She had to keep up appearances for Sherrill. She didn't want her to know how much Sherrill's sexual encounter with Royce had upset her.

Damn the man! Why were men so horrible? Royce was obviously someone who liked power trips. How dare he flirt with her, only to throw himself at some piece of trash like Sherrill?

She burned as she pictured the two all over each other. Sherrill had only been in his office a few seconds when Royce leapt out of his chair and rushed to get his hands all over her. Then he'd taken the witch into his arms and taken her to the sofa. Sophie knew exactly what they'd been doing there. The jerk!

She would get on the Internet that night and look for a job. No way was she going to stand for any more of Royce's torture: those kisses and those horrid spankings. How dare he toy with her?

Sophie looked down at her torn dress with dismay. Not only had Royce broken her heart, he'd caused her to tear her nicest dress! After Sherrill had alerted her to Royce's libidinous ways, Sophie had followed her to Royce's office and had hidden below in the center of the machinery to spy on the two.

Right after watching Royce attack Sherrill, Sophie's stupid dress had gotten caught in the machine. Thank goodness, she'd been able to yank the material out of that nasty contraption. There was no way she was letting that machine beat her a third time. After almost dying twice that day at its

hands, she'd shown that machine a thing or two. Of course, it had won a small prize. She'd had to leave behind a part of that dress; she'd lost a good three inches of material from the back. Luckily, the skirt of the dress flowed nicely and hardly anyone would notice.

She sat at her desk and began work on a spreadsheet. Sherrill sat across from her, sending her little looks from time to time.

"What?" Sophie finally asked.

"I told you so," Sherrill said.

"I know. I suppose I should thank you."

"Yes, you should," Sherrill said with a sinister look on her pretty face.

"Uh, thanks." *For nothing!*

"So, have you heard?" Sherrill asked.

"Heard what?"

"The whole line crashed."

"Is that why it's so quiet?" Sophie asked.

"Yep. The plant guys might have to work on Saturday, if they don't get the machine up and running again."

"Does anyone know what happened?"

Sherrill said, "I overheard Bob Jenkins say that something got jammed in the machine. He wasn't sure what."

The pit of Sophie's stomach dropped. It couldn't be. Not that measly little piece of dress. No, that was ridiculous.

Just then, off in the distance, she heard a rumbling. The machine was back on line! She breathed a sigh of relief. The line stopping was probably due to some part of the machine that came loose. Couldn't be from just a wisp of material. She knew it couldn't be her fault. Not three times in one day. No way. She'd never caused that much damage in one single day in her life.

Sophie had just returned to her spreadsheet when she heard a bellow at the far end of the office.

"Where is she?!" a thundering voice demanded. "Where is Sophie McClain?!"

She froze, petrified. Oh, my God! It was Royce, and he was furious! It *had* been her dress that had caused the machine to break! She had to hide! She had to get out of there!

"Where is she?! Someone tell me where that menace is!" Royce roared.

Sophie grabbed her purse and ducked down in her cube. She warned Sherrill with a look to shut up. Sherrill was greatly enjoying the scene, but pantomimed zipping her lips shut.

"Where is she?! Sophie! Get out here, now!" he commanded.

Sophie peeked up and saw him heading down the rows of cubicles, searching for her. She'd never seen anyone that mad before. Her heart pounding out of her chest, she crouched down, left her cubicle and snuck down the aisle, away from Royce.

She crawled down the aisle, searching for the hallway that would take her out of the building. She had to hurry.

She turned a corner, and there were two large feet there. Above the feet were two suited legs. She didn't even want to look up. But she did. And wished she hadn't. Royce towered above her, his face a mask of fury. His eyes were glowing red; she could almost see the steam coming out of his ears.

"You!" he thundered. "Just where the hell do you think you're going?! Did you actually think you could get away from me?!"

He reached down and yanked her off the ground. With a firm grip on her upper arm, he began dragging her out of the office.



As he passed Martha, her supervisor, he said, "Miss McClain is done for the day. And I'm not sure she'll ever be back!"

All the women and men in the cubicles looked terrified as he dragged her past them. Sophie herself was so frightened she was about to faint.

As they cleared the office doors, she attempted to talk to him. "Uh, Royce?"

"Silence!" he bellowed down at her. "You will be silent!"

Sophie decided it was probably the best choice. But why didn't he just fire her?

She thought he'd be dragging her to his office. But he passed his office and went straight out to the parking lot and up to his car.

"Get in!" he commanded.

"But..."

"Get the hell in the car now, woman!" he ordered loudly.

Tears in her eyes, Sophie obeyed him.

They rode in silence for a long time. He'd glare over at her once in a while; Sophie had never been more scared or more confused. He'd used her. Apparently, he used all the women under his control. And now she had no idea what he was going to do with her. But it was clear he'd had enough of her.

But then why had he forced her into his car? And where the hell were they going? Why hadn't he fired her already and sent her on her way?

He pulled up and parked in front of a very nice Mediterranean-style house in a lovely neighborhood. His?

He got out; she stayed in the car, petrified.

"Sophie, out now!!" he ordered.

Shaking, she got out of the car. He took her by the arm and led her to the front door. He opened it with a key and shoved her inside.

She stood in the tiled entry hall and took a quick check of the house. Off to her right, was a large sunken living room with high, wooden-beamed ceilings. To her left was an office. Other doors led off the back of the large hallway, probably to the kitchen and such. Gorgeous house.

Royce grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into his office. At the back of the room was a giant desk, and in front of it, sat two upholstered leather chairs. A large leather sofa lined the wall underneath the front window.

He dragged her to the leather sofa, sat down and yanked her down across his lap. Not this! She began kicking her legs and screaming at him not to spank her.

But he was deaf to her pleas. He got her arm behind her back, pinned her legs and adjusted her so that her rear was high up in the air.

"Royce, no!"

To her horror, she felt him pull up the back of her dress to around her waist. Then he tugged on the back of her panties and pulled them all the way down to her ankles. She felt the air rush over her exposed and already bruised behind.

She felt him bring his arm back, and when he swung down and impacted her poor, vulnerable rear, the pain took her breath away.

"Royce, no!" she howled.

Royce lit into her behind like a madman. The flat of his hand felt like a solid wooden paddle as it smacked her with gusto and precision. The sharp cracking sound of his swats filled the tile-floored room. She could hear her cries of pain echo back at her from the stucco walls. This was awful!

She tried to wriggle away from him, but he just yanked her back, raising her ass even higher in the air for a wider target range. She shrieked with pain, as he spanked not only her burning buns, but the

backs of her thighs as well. She had never felt such agony in all her life. Who knew a spanking could hurt this bad?

He seemed really mad, too. Okay, so she'd ruined his machine, at least, she hadn't lied to him. The man had been all over Sherrill; what was wrong with him?

On and on, her punishment went. Each blow jerked her forward a bit; the man was really putting his all into it. She cried and bellowed and wailed at him to stop, but he didn't listen to a word of it. He had one thing on his mind and that was her spanking. She wasn't sure she'd ever sit again in her life.

Finally, just about the time she thought she was going to lose her mind from the pain, he stopped. She continued to sob and cry. What an awful day! What an awful man!

"Sophie! Quiet down and listen to me," he ordered.

She kept crying and sobbing. How dare he order her to stop crying when he'd spanked her so cruelly?

"Sophie, now!" he commanded, punctuating his order with a sharp swat to her flaming behind.

Sophie stopped. The tears continued to leak out of her eyes, and she couldn't help but sob, but she managed to stop wailing. In no way did she want to invite more attentions to her overwhelmed rear.

"Now, look, you, when I give you an order, you will obey it!"

She said nothing.

"What the hell were you doing on the floor? I told you to stay away from there. What's wrong with you?"

She'd had enough. She pushed herself off his lap, and he let her get up. She pulled up her undies

and stood there, shaking with rage, glaring down at him.

"You lied to me!" she yelled.

His expression hardened. He looked like he wanted to spank her again.

"You watch your words, young lady, or you're going to find yourself over my knee again," he warned.

"Don't you dare spank me again! Fine, I broke your machine! So what? You broke my heart, you, you two-timing liar!"

Before she could stop herself, she slapped him, hard, across the face.

His temper ignited. He leapt to his feet, and reached for her, but she leapt back out of the way and ran.

"I hate you! I hate you!" she screamed.

"You come back here!" he roared.

"No! I hate you! I never want to see you again!" she bellowed.

She ran for the front door, but he leapt in front of her and blocked her way. When he reached for her, she dodged him and dashed for the back of the house.

"Sophie McClain, you stop running from me and get back here! If you don't, I swear, I'll get my paddle out and spank that bare behind of yours until it's black and blue!"

"Two-timing liar! I'll call the police and sue you for assault!" she screamed over her shoulder.

She got to the back door, unlocked it, flung it open and leapt out into his expansive back yard.

She got all the way to the gate in the back fence when he grabbed her from behind.

She fought and wrestled and punched and kicked him, but he finally got control over her and threw her over his shoulder. He carried her back

inside— the whole time she wailed at the top of her lungs.

He brought her into his office again, wrestled her across his lap and began spanking her again.

"You shut up, you calm down and tell me what the hell you're talking about," he said, swatting her with ferocity. To her relief, he stopped quite quickly.

"You lied to me!" she wailed.

"How? When? What did I say? Talk to me!" he demanded.

"You make out with all the girls in the office!"

"I *WHAT?*" he demanded, loudly. He pulled her up, flung her down on the couch next to him and pinned her there.

"You look at me and tell me this nonsense. I what? What did you say I did?" he demanded.

"You cheated on me! You sleep with all the girls in the office!"

He gasped in horror. "I do not! Where the hell did you get that idea?!"

"Sherrill told me! I saw you! You were all over her! You touched her and then took her in your arms and took her over to the couch! And I know what you did then! I didn't have to see that part! I saw enough!" she roared.

"Wait a minute, just wait a goddamned minute there! I did no such thing! Your overactive imagination saw what you wanted to see!"

"I didn't want to see that! Sherrill told me where to watch. I just followed her, and I saw what you did to her! I saw with my own two eyes! My imagination had nothing to do with it! I saw you; you were all over her!"

"She spilled coffee all down her front, and then she fainted..." He stopped and let go of her. "That horrible little bitch. Wait, wait, wait. Did Sherrill tell you that I slept with all the girls?"

"Yes, and then I saw you!"

"No, you didn't. Sherrill came into my office on the guise of giving me a report, which she never gave me. Two seconds after she arrived, she spilled coffee down her front. I helped her clean up, and then she collapsed in my arms saying she felt faint. Now wait. You say you followed her?"

"Yeah, she told me what you were gonna do to her. She told me that you called her into your office."

"Well, I didn't. She arrived unexpectedly. She told you where to watch me?"

"Yeah, from the assembly room floor. She showed me where to watch."

"And then she staged the whole thing. I knew I should have fired her. Sophie, I know you don't know me very well, but I'm not capable of that kind of behavior. Sherrill set you up. She must have heard about our lunch and decided to hurt you. And me."

His words rang true. Too true. This accounted for all those sly looks that Sherrill had given her. And Sophie was so dumb; she'd fallen for it. As the incident played back through her mind, Royce's description of the scene made sense. It did look like he'd been mopping off Sherrill. And Sherrill had collapsed into his arms. Huh.

Sophie looked deep into Royce's eyes. "Please tell me you're not lying to me."

"I'm not lying to you," he said, his eyes clear.

"Now, I feel stupid," Sophie said, looking at the floor.

Royce reached out and grabbed her chin and turned it towards him. "Don't. Sherrill is very manipulative and is very good at her deceptions. I'm just sorry you believed her. I'm sorry she hurt you. I... I couldn't hurt you, Sophie, I couldn't." He leaned in and kissed her.

Wow! A bolt of electricity shot through her body. His kiss deepened, and Sophie got lost in him. He brought her to him, pulling her up into his lap while his tongue did marvelous things to her.

When he pulled away, his eyes were dark with lust. "Sophie, I've fallen in love with you. I want you so badly, I can barely stand it."

She began crying. "I love you, too, Royce!"

He pulled her to him and kissed her deeply. His hand dropped between her legs; she eagerly spread them for him. He groaned into her mouth as his hand slid up her thigh. After toying with her through her underpants, he slipped a finger under the elastic and found her sex.

Sophie was so overcome with lust that she nearly fainted. Royce slid a finger inside her, and she moaned with hunger.

Royce brought her to a quick orgasm, and before she knew it, they were both naked. He proceeded to make love to her on his office couch; she'd never known such ecstasy.

Afterwards, she lay in his arms; so satisfied, so happy.

"My God, I love you, woman. Where have you been? I've been looking for someone like you for so long, I didn't think I'd ever find you."

"You have no idea how happy you're making me, Royce. After George died, I thought I was going to be alone the rest of my life. You're making me so happy."

"I love you, Sophie."

"I love you, Royce."

"Oh, by the way?" he said.

"What?"

"You're fired."

"What?" she asked, alarmed. When she checked his face, he was grinning.

"You heard me, Missy, you're fired."

"But—"

"I have a new position for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The position of my wife is open. Do you want it?"

Tears sprang into her eyes. "Do you mean it?"

"With all my heart, darling. From now on, you will live here with me and paint all day long and fill my house with beautiful artwork. And when I come home at night, I'm going to make love to you from one side of the house to the other. What do you think about that?"

"I love you, Royce!" she said and kissed him.



## Dark Threats

### Chapter One

"What did I tell you?" Reid demanded, his face mere inches from hers. His pale blue eyes were on fire, his square jaw was set, she'd never seen him this mad before.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"What did I tell you? I said, stay in the car. Didn't I? Didn't I?"

"Well—"

"Aw, forget it, we have to get out of here. Now follow me, you do understand those words, don't you? Follow me?" he said in a nasty tone.

"Yeah, I understand them," she muttered. She wasn't taking much more of his crap. She wasn't. She'd hired him, not the other way around. And truthfully, Zoe wasn't in the habit of taking orders. She never had and she never would.

"Good, do it. Don't make me ask you again. Christ! I knew I shouldn't have let you come along with me, I knew it. I should have left you back at the hotel."

"I have no—"

"I gave you a direct order to stay in the car. What part of 'stay in the car' didn't you understand?"

"Yo," she said, holding up a hand. "I got it. You're upset. Back off before you piss me off."

Reid's face flushed red. His eyes were wild. "Woman, don't push me. I may have taken this case as a favor to your brother, but that does *not* give you permission to talk back to me. You do as I say and you don't give me any lip, you got that?"

"No. I don't. I got out of the car because I was worried about you. Sorry I bothered," she said, turning and striding away.

He caught her by the arm and swung her around to face him. His wide blue gaze assaulted her. She had to admit, the man was nothing less than hot when he was mad. She'd noticed his rugged good looks the first time she'd met him, but now, all fired up, the guy was a babe. His chiseled features gave him the appearance of a street thug, but the intelligence in his gaze took the edge off his appearance. That along with his metrosexual style softened him. But it was clear he was still a hardass.

"Don't, Zoe. You hear me? I don't take BS from people. Especially not snotty know-it-all little brats like you. Just because you push around your employees—and your brother—doesn't mean you can push me around. You got that? So stop. And obey me when I tell you something."

"I don't obey people. I weigh their suggestions and make up my own mind."

"This isn't a game, Zoe. Those weren't firecrackers you heard earlier. Someone was firing at me."

"Did you get a look at who that might be?" she asked.

"No, because you showed up right when I was circling to get a look at them. I had to stop to save your pretty little behind."

"Oh."

"Yeah 'oh'. Now I know you don't hear this very much, but you will obey me, woman. I promised your brother I'd find out who's blackmailing you and who made those attempts on your life and that's what I intend to do. So you're going to be a good girl and listen to me and do exactly what I tell you to do. You hear me?"

"I have no idea why you're being so hostile here. I got out of the car to see if you were okay."

"I don't need your protection. *You* are the one who needs my protection and if you don't start listening to me and doing what I tell you—"

"For God's sake. Lay off the rabid dog routine. I got you," she snapped.

He looked even more enraged, if that was possible. "You stop and you stop this crap now. Because, lady, I am this—" he warned, holding up his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart, "—close to taking you across my knee. And don't think I won't do it."

She couldn't help but laugh at his ridiculous threat. Before she could comprehend it, he had her by her collar and had her slammed up against the side of the warehouse. "Don't. Push. Me," he warned in a low growl. "You think you can push around everyone in your life. Well, you can't push me around. And I can guarantee you, if you wind up over my knee, you will *not* find it funny." He pulled her away from the wall and pushed her ahead of him. "We're going to the car," he spat from behind her.

Rage welled up inside her; she clenched her fists and teeth as she walked towards the car. She had half a mind to slap him, but considering that they were in a dangerous situation, she'd go along with the madman for the time being. But quite shortly, the man was going to learn an important lesson about Zoe McMillan. A lesson he'd never forget. No man treated her this way. She was the one who made the rules; men were the ones who obeyed her. Not the other way around.

She managed to hold her tongue all the way to the car. She impressed herself. Normally, she would have accosted him by now.

They got in the car and she took a deep breath to calm herself. He started the car and pulled away from the curb.

"Did you get the tape?" she finally managed to ask in a civil tone.

"Yeah, I got the tape. No thanks to you. We both almost died back there, you do realize that, don't you? Now I told you I'd work for you only if you listened to me. You didn't and you almost cost us both our lives."

She closed her eyes. Dealing with this man was going to be harder than she thought. Maybe if she shut up, he'd stop.

Reid continued. "I knew you were going to be trouble when your brother hired me—he told me as much—but I had no idea really how much trouble you were going to be."

"If you don't shut up, I will gouge out both your eyes," she stated flatly.

He snorted. "One wonders how you've made it this far in your life without someone offing you. Wait. That's right. Someone *is* trying to take you out. I wonder why," he countered snidely.

"Contrary to popular belief—well the beliefs held by my brother and yourself—I get along well with people."

"That's why someone tried to run you down with their car. And tried to shoot you. And tried to poison you. Because you get along so well with people."

"That is one sick person of my acquaintance of a field of a few hundred."

Reid looked over at her and then returned his attentions to the road. "Has to be a man. One you rode roughshod over and now he's finally decided to stop you. Albeit in a rather crude way, but I'll just bet our culprit is some guy you abused. Someone who doesn't like ball-busting women. I mean, the better I get to know you, the more I understand his sentiment, but still, there are better ways to deal with a woman like you."

"Oh, yes. I think you mentioned one earlier. That spanking idea. Very sophisticated."

"Sometimes the simplest methods achieve the best results. And in your case, I think a good old-fashioned spanking would do you wonders."

"Oh, please. I do wish you'd catch up and join the contemporary world, Mr. Caveman. Apparently, you aren't used to dealing with a strong woman. Probably only dealt with pushovers."

Reid shook his head. "You may think acting like a man gives you more power, but it just annoys people. And puts off prospective mates. It's no wonder why you're still single."

Zoe laughed. "The men of my acquaintance don't find blind acquiescence particularly feminine, nor attractive. And believe me, there are plenty of men in the world who find a strong woman very attractive. And I have plenty of men. Too many, as a matter of fact. I just don't believe in marriage. I have no intention of becoming some Neanderthal's slave. And because I demand respect and equitable treatment, that negates most men's idea of marriage. And I don't speak of my affairs to my brother, which makes him think that I don't have any. But he would be wrong."

"So what kind of simpering sycophants do you date, anyway? Let me guess, they have perfect manners, they ask permission to kiss you, they hang on your every word, they hold your bags when you go shopping and they bring you breakfast in bed."

"And what would be wrong with any of that?"

He laughed. "Nothing. I guess you like guys who are in denial about their sexuality."

"The men I date are very masculine. I prefer a masculine man."

"I'm sure," he retorted. "How many live with their mothers?"

"None. Well, one did, but I dumped him."

"Too much competition?"

"Too needy."

"So you don't like to be needed?" Reid asked.

"No. I don't. I don't date needy men. I date men who have lives and who enjoy some female companionship from time to time."

"So where does love fit into this picture?" Reid asked.

Zoe snorted. "Love? Are you kidding me? You? Speaking of love? When was the last time you fell in love?"

"We were talking about you."

"I realize that and I asked you when the last time was you fell in love."

"Ten years ago," he said.

"Oh, and who was this paragon of virtue?"

"My wife."

"You were married? Well, you aren't wearing a ring. Let me guess, you cheated on her and—"

"She died of cancer two years ago."

Zoe felt slapped. And immediately ashamed. She could feel her face flush. "Oh. My apologies. I had no idea. I'm sorry. I assumed you..."

"You thought I was a confirmed bachelor. Drinking hard, carousing, living dangerously."

"Well, yes."

"Well, I may live dangerously, but I only drink occasionally and I don't carouse. I haven't even dated since Jenny died. Haven't found anyone worthy, nor have I been very interested. She's a hard act to follow."

"How long were you married?"

"Eight years, until she died."

"I'm truly sorry for your loss. I've never... there hasn't been anyone I cared about enough to... well, once, but that was years ago. I've found it's much

better to live my life through my work and home. Not... others."

"I feel sorry for you. There's nothing like a good relationship."

"I'll have to take your word for that."

He nodded and kept his eyes on the road.

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"This tape is blank," she said with astonishment after they viewed the tape Reid had recovered. They sat in her hotel suite, the place she'd chosen for refuge after Reid had deemed her house too dangerous.

"Which proves my theory. They baited you. They probably have nothing incriminating against you. You said as much earlier."

"Well..." Zoe said, looking away.

Reid nodded her way. "What?"

She shrugged. "There is one event that could do some damage to my career. If they managed to find out."

"This is new information. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I was... well, ashamed."

"You? Ashamed?"

"Uh... yes."

"Well, what is it?" he demanded.

"I'd still rather not say. Suffice to say, I'm not even sure they know. I'm not sure anyone knows. Well, one person might."

"Zoe. How can I protect you if I don't know the whole story?"

"Well, this may have nothing to do with the attempts on my life."

"And it may have a lot."

"Look, Reid, I thought we already determined that the person after me is probably someone I sued. There are so many people who have cause to

be angry with me, I seriously doubt it has anything to do with that case."

"What case?" he asked.

"It was three years ago, I really doubt—"

"Zoe, if you hadn't intended on telling me, you shouldn't have mentioned this... whatever it was."

"Okay, fine. I provided some evidence to get a guy put away. A guy I represented."

He looked shocked. "You?"

"Yes, me. He was a creep, he... he hurt an elderly lady and robbed her and apparently had done this sort of thing before, he'd just never been caught. He would have been freed due to lack of evidence and I..."

"Provided some."

"Yes. I found a key piece of evidence he'd hidden and leaked its whereabouts to the prosecuting attorney, who admitted it in court. It was the pivotal piece of evidence that got him convicted."

"Did anyone else in the office know you did this?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. But... since blackmail was mentioned in that note... Let me write down the convict's name. He's in San Quentin doing twenty years. He suspected I was involved with his demise, but I lied through my teeth. He was a very dangerous person."

Reid seemed encouraged. "This may be just the break we needed."

"Are there no other leads?"

"My partner has followed up on the people you outlined as potential attackers."

"And?"



"He's still working on them. He's narrowed it down to ten suspects. He's going to report to me later on."

Zoe said, "All right, good. Tomorrow I have to return to the office."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Look, I know most of the attacks happened there, but I have important work to do. I can't keep working remotely, I have to talk to people."

"I'll have someone come with you."

Annoyed, Zoe said, "The last two attacks happened near my home. I think I'll be safe at the office."

"Doubtful. And besides, your brother said he'd cover for you," Reid said.

"Yes, he did. But there's an important case I have to work on. All my files are there."

"I can get someone to retrieve them."

Zoe shook her head. "No. I need to do it myself. It's sensitive material. And it's a case I really don't want my brother knowing I'm involved with. He didn't want me taking the case and I did anyway and the job needs my attention."

"Why doesn't he want you involved with the case?" Reid asked.

"I have no idea. He said he just didn't like murder cases. Which is weird, because we've handled so many."

"All right," Reid said. "But you go straight there and straight back here, you understand me? No stop-offs for coffee or anything. I'll have someone follow you to make sure you're okay. Then we'll meet back here tomorrow evening and I'll tell you what I found out about your criminal."

"Please don't alert him."

Reid looked shocked. "I would never endanger you, I'm the one trying to save you, remember?"

"Sorry, sorry. I just... I'm still ashamed even though the man was... he was one of the most horrible people I've ever met. I don't represent criminals like him anymore. That cured me." She shuddered. "And I'm still afraid of him."

"Don't worry, Zoe, I'll make sure not to mention anything about you. I have ways of getting information out of people. Don't worry."

"I'll try not to."

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At the last minute, Reid decided to accompany her to the office. He waited for her to get her files and then drove her back to the hotel. Apparently, he didn't trust her. She was annoyed, but she'd gotten the work she'd needed. Shortly after they returned to the hotel, Reid left for his office with a strict warning for Zoe to stay put at the hotel. She agreed, but was getting tired of the dictatorial way the man ordered her around. She got the feeling he enjoyed pushing her buttons. She was convinced he'd never met a strong woman like her before and somehow it made him question his masculinity. At least, this was her favorite theory. She really couldn't figure him out. He was an enigma.

Of course, she'd never really gotten along with macho men. She always kept the upper hand, it was one of her primary objectives when dealing with men. She'd never turn out like her mother, the forever victim of her father's constant verbal abuse.

Zoe had grown up confronting her father and standing up to him. While it had gotten her more abuse than her brother (who played the passive role with her father) at least she'd gained her father's respect—something her brother Tad had never received. She'd never understood her brother's unwillingness to go head-to-head with her father. Certainly, her father was a brute, but it was no

reason not to stand up to him. Zoe had found her arguments with her father exhilarating. Tad always backed down and silently took his father's continual criticism; he told Zoe it was easier that way.

Because of Zoe's constant fighting with her father, he'd deemed her the best one to inherit the senior position at the family law firm. Her father had recognized that Zoe commanded more respect in the office than Tad and despite her father's prejudice against women, when he retired, he appointed her head of the firm. Tad had grumbled a bit about that, but Zoe had convinced him that he wouldn't want the responsibility. And she knew there was no way he could handle the pressure.

Tad was a very nice man, too nice. As a result, he was more well liked in the office, but too much of a pushover. Even Zoe had trouble respecting him. When it came down to the tough decisions, Zoe made them all. She fired people and hired people. She battled the toughest court cases, she brought in the most money to the office. Tad just couldn't make the hard decisions, nor could he stand up for his clients any more than he'd stood up for himself against his father. Zoe protected Tad and loved him, but she didn't quite understand him. She probably never would. Tad had a private side to him that no one seemed to penetrate. Zoe hoped someday he'd fall in love and get married, so he'd at least have a good woman on his side.

The one thing that Tad did better than Zoe was mediation. Because of his passive nature and gentle spirit, people trusted him readily. When a client was upset, the firm sent Tad to comfort them. Zoe always thought the two of them made a great team. She wasn't sure how Tad felt about it, but she was fairly sure he felt the same way.

Zoe was finishing up answering some emails on her computer when her cell phone rang. She checked the incoming number: unknown.

Reid had given her a device for recording phone conversations. She reached for it, plugged it into her phone and answered the call.

A voice came over the phone, one that she didn't recognize. It sounded like it was being put through a voice-changing device. Her heart began pounding.

"Miss McMillan. If you want information on your assailant, go to Olive and Laurel Streets and wait at a table at the restaurant there on Laurel—Café Blanco. Wait there for further instructions. Do not inform your bodyguard. Come alone. I will be watching, if I see him there, I will leave." Click.

Stunned, Zoe didn't know what to do. Which was unusual. Normally, she made snap decisions, but dealing with an unknown assailant was not the same as dealing with a judge or a client. Should she call Reid? Should she go? After a few minutes of deliberations, Zoe decided to go. She'd be in a public place, so she should be safe.

Zoe arrived at the café ten minutes later. She drove around the block twice, to see if she noticed any suspicious characters. She didn't see anything unusual. Most of the tables outside were occupied. It looked safe. The café was in the middle of the block of many small stores in the busy downtown area of San Carlos. Zoe parked the car and cautiously walked to the café, chose a small table for two and sat down. Almost immediately, a waitress appeared. Zoe ordered coffee and a pastry.

After five nerve-wracking minutes, Zoe began to relax. Might have been a hoax. She sipped her coffee and took a bite of her pastry.

Suddenly, from behind her, she heard her name. "Zoe!"

She spun around and found herself looking into the rabid gaze of none other than Reid Daniels. He was wearing sunglasses, so it wasn't easy to see his eyes, but that set square jaw and his furrowed brow told the story. He was ready to annihilate her.

"Reid! What are you doing here?"

"No, what are you doing here? Didn't I give you explicit orders to stay put? What are you trying to do? Get yourself—wait. Why are you here?"

"I got a call from... wait. Why are you here?"

"I got a call, too. Quick, let's get out of here. This is clearly another set-up."

Without asking, Reid grabbed her by the arm and none-too-gently pulled her up out of her chair and shoved her ahead of himself. By his posture and the position of his free hand, she knew he had his hand on his weapon.

Zoe heard the squealing of tires and suddenly, Reid shoved her to the ground. She heard a popping sound and a window shattered near her. People began screaming and running for cover all around them.

Reid yelled, "They're getting away! Stay down!" He took off running.

When Zoe looked up, she saw the back of Reid flying down the street in pursuit of a dark sedan. The sedan turned the corner and Reid followed.

Zoe got up and dusted herself off. People were shouting, the storeowner was checking out the damage to his windows and swearing loudly to himself.

A few minutes later, Reid appeared around the corner, looking winded and defeated. He walked right up to her and without saying a word, he grabbed her by the arm and began leading her off.

After a few moments he barked, "Where are you parked?"

"Behind the café in the parking lot."

"You and I are going to have a talk."

Zoe thought Reid was going to lead her to her car, but he took her to his Ford Explorer instead. It was a big, black job with tinted windows.

"Why are you—?"

Reid hushed her with a glare, opened his SUV and oddly enough, shoved her into the large back seat. He got in beside her and closed the door behind him.

Before she could comprehend his actions, he reached for her, pulled her across his lap and pinned her there.

Her shocked mind could barely understand what happened next. The man began spanking her. Hard.

It took a good few whacks on her bottom before she could snap out of her shock.

"Hey! You stop that!" she ordered.

He answered by spanking her harder. This smarted!

"You Neanderthal jerk! You stop this and you stop this now! I order you to stop!"

Reid began a machine-gun report of very hard swats across her now very tender behind. She wore linen Capri pants, which provided little to no protection against Reid's firm hand. She wished she'd worn her normal panties, but to avoid panty lines, she'd worn a thong. Stupid choice.

"Reid! I demand that you stop! Ow! What is wrong with you?! Have you lost your bloody mind?! Stop that and let me up immediately!"

He seemed deaf to her pleas. He continued his torment; she'd never felt such pain before. Even when she was a child and her father had spanked her, he'd never hit her this hard. What was wrong with this jerk? Didn't he know who she was? No one dared to defy her orders like this! The man wasn't just going to get fired, he was going to get sued for assault!

Zoe tried desperately to avoid crying, but the pain was overwhelming. In no way did she want to give the idiot the satisfaction of seeing her tears, but she had no idea how to stop them. Her rear end was blazing!

"Reid! Stop!" Unfortunately, her voice cracked on her last word. She didn't want him to know how much pain she was in, but she wanted him to stop.

"Reid! Please! I can't take much more!" she cried.

Finally, she broke down into tears. Shortly afterwards, Reid stopped. He yanked her up off his lap. His eyes were fiery, his temper clearly ignited.

She went to slap him, but he caught her arm, pulled her to him and suddenly, the madman was kissing her.

It was a full thirty seconds before she regained her senses. Then quite quickly, she got lost in the man. His kiss deepened and she found herself responding, fully. All she could think about was making love to him.

Zoe didn't know what was happening to her, but she found she didn't care. All she wanted was him.

## Dark Threats

### Chapter Two

Reid couldn't stop himself. He couldn't figure out why he'd kissed her, but now that he was, he never wanted the kiss to end. Zoe was the sexiest, hottest woman he'd ever kissed. From her luscious mane of dark brown hair to her fiery brown eyes to her amazing, voluptuous body, there wasn't one part of her he didn't enjoy. While some part of him still wanted to strangle her, there was this other, more urgent part of him that needed her. Needed to make love to her. Never wanted to stop making love to her.

The energy between them was electric.

Her hands were all over him, feeling his arms, his back. One hand trailed down to touch his hardness through his pants. He groaned deep in his throat and pushed her down on the backseat of his SUV.

He couldn't help thinking that she'd almost died, again. That was three times the assailant had attacked her, this last time, right in front of him. He couldn't stand the thought of someone hurting her. He had to protect her. Now it went beyond his job; he wanted to protect her for *him*. Because he was falling in love with her.

He wasn't sure when it had happened. It surprised him, because she was such a ball-buster. Normally, he wasn't attracted to pushy, dominant women, but Zoe McMillan was an exception. A delicious exception. He hadn't planned on kissing her, either. But after she'd almost died—after countermanding an order of his—he'd lost all control. He'd dragged her to his SUV, intending to spank her, lecture her and nothing else. Anything to get through to her. But after he'd spanked her,



some part of him had taken over and suddenly, he found himself kissing her.

Even more surprising was her response. She was right there with him, as turned on and as fiercely attracted to him as he was to her. It was a volatile combination. He wasn't sure what would happen, but at the moment, he didn't care. All he wanted was her.

While their lips were still locked in a passionate kiss, Zoe began unbuttoning his top, and he reached for the zipper on her pants. Reid was almost frantic with desire. He could think only of being inside her. Deep inside.

She unzipped his trousers, unleashing his granite-hard tool; he pushed her legs apart while she latched onto him and began stroking him. He moaned loudly, and she grabbed hold of his rear and pulled him down on top of her. He thrust into her, finding a welcome wetness that almost made him come right then.

He drove into her like a madman, the ferocity of his attack inwardly surprising him. He hadn't needed a woman like this since he was a teenager. Luckily, she was as caught up in the moment as he. She threw her head back against the seat of his SUV, shoving her hips upward to meet his thrusts. She cried out, and he could feel her inner muscles spasming against him, which nearly sent him over the edge. He hung on for a few thrusts more, but couldn't stop himself. He plowed into her, crying out in his own release.

He continued to drive inside her, long after he'd come; he couldn't get enough of her. Finally, he withdrew, took her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

He finally managed to end the kiss. He sat up, bringing her with him. They stared at each other, disheveled and winded.

"Well, that was surprising," she finally said. Then she seemed to notice that they were in a parking lot. In the back of his SUV in broad daylight. She pulled up her pants and he followed suit.

As he dressed, he finally became aware of the sirens in the background. All the memories of the shooting and Zoe almost dying came flooding back to him.

He inwardly cursed himself. He hadn't intended on making love to her. What he'd wanted to do was to shock her. Spank her, wake her up. She almost got sprayed with bullets. He couldn't stand the thought of her dying. He wanted to lecture her, not bonk her. But apparently, his body had other ideas. He just hoped she'd take him seriously from here on out. He hoped she'd listen to him.

"Reid?"

"Sorry, I... didn't intend to... oh, hell. Look, obviously, I'm seriously attracted to you. And with you almost dying, I... damn it. I meant to lecture you, spank you, wake you up. Why the hell did you take off like that? Why didn't you call me?" he demanded.

"I... okay, that was stupid. I acknowledge that," Zoe said. "You didn't have to spank me. The bullets whizzing by my head did enough to me."

"I certainly *did* have to spank you. And I won't apologize for that."

"But you're apologizing for making love to me?" she asked, looking hurt.

"No. No, I fully meant that. I mean... oh, hell. I'm not good at this kind of thing. And I broke every rule I've laid out for myself regarding clients."

She got a half-smile on her lovely face. "So you don't normally... uh, make love to your clients in the back seat of your SUV?"

He laughed. "Uh, no. You're the first."

She smiled widely. "You know, your whole face changes when you smile. You're so much more handsome when you do."

He flushed with pleasure from her compliment. "I think that's the first nice thing you've said to me."

"Is it? Hmmm. That's too bad."

"Look, Zoe. Aside from what just happened between us, you have to listen to me. I know you're used to being your own boss, but in this instance, I do know better than you. Did you get a call? Is that why you came down here?"

She nodded; her face reddened. "Yeah. Stupid, I know. The caller said that they had information about who was after me. If I didn't come alone, they wouldn't tell me."

"I got the same message."

Slack-jawed, her eyes widened. "They called you?"

"Yeah, how else would I have known to come down here?"

"I don't know. They called you? They told me not to tell you."

"They told me the same thing," he said, puzzled. "This makes no sense. Why would they get me down here if they wanted to take you out?"

"They must have wanted to shoot us both," Zoe replied.

The words reverberated through his head. She was right. Not only was Zoe the intended target, so was he. A new twist on the case and not a good one.

"You're right. Well, this changes things. Now the suspect wants us both dead. But why?"

Zoe said, "Because you're probably getting closer to them."

"But I'm not. That's what's frustrating me. None of those leads panned out. My partner looked into

all of them; everyone had alibis. This makes no sense."

"Maybe we were both the intended targets from the word go. You were recommended by someone to my brother. We need to ask him who recommended you."

Reid nodded. "This will actually make things easier if we're both the targets. We just have to find the common bond between us."

"Since that new common bond just happened, that isn't it. Can't be a jealous ex-mate," she said with a sly grin.

He leaned over and kissed her.

When he pulled away, she asked, "So... do you do this often? Should I be flattered?"

Reid didn't want to lose her by confessing too much too early. "No and yes."

"So..."

Reid studied her. "You said you don't like getting too involved with your lovers."

"Is that why you..."

"No. I was hoping to change your mind on that score."

She lit up. Her eyes shined, her smile broadened. "I may have to make an exception in your case, Mr. Daniels."

Relief washed over him. He grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that." He kissed her again.

He didn't know what would happen between them, but he hoped they had a future together. But given her past, who knew? He knew right then that he wanted to marry her. But she wasn't the marrying type. He hoped she'd fall for him. He wanted her. And he wanted to keep her. Even if that meant a load of trouble. And Zoe McMillan was definitely a load of trouble.

"So, how often have you spanked women?" she asked.

He shrugged. "A few times."

"So, this is a practice of yours?"

"Only if my women don't listen to me and almost get themselves killed or if they clobber me over the head with a frying pan. Then I tend to get a little angry and frustrated."

Zoe's eyes widened. "Someone really hit you with a frying pan?"

"Yes, my first live-in girlfriend. We split up shortly after that."

"Why did she hit you?"

"Because I spanked her after she stole my credit card and went on a two-thousand dollar shopping spree."

"Oh, my God. Sounds like a match made in Heaven."

"Pretty much. We were both twenty-one at the time."

Zoe shook her head. "Damn, when I was twenty-one, I was too busy studying and interning at the family law firm to do anything else. I didn't even have time for a boyfriend at that point of my life."

"And you do now?"

"I'll make some time for you."

He smiled. "Good."

"Just tell me you won't spank me again. I don't agree with violence in a relationship."

He almost promised her anything after her reference to their affair as a relationship, but he stood his ground. He'd blown it before, acquiescing too much to his woman's demands at the beginning of a relationship. He didn't want to ruin this one by setting up false expectations.

"I don't consider spanking violence," Reid said and held up a hand. "Wait, before you jump down my throat, hear me out. I reserve the right to spank you if I think your life depends on it. If you're not

listening to me about something that could get you injured or hurt or is life threatening, you bet I'll spank you again. But I'm hoping from here on out, you'll listen to me."

"What about my own judgment?" Zoe demanded.

"What just happened?"

"Well, maybe this wasn't a good example," she conceded.

"Will you listen to me from here on out? While this assailant is still after you?"

"Yes. Well, yes with exceptions. If I think you're being too over-protective, I reserve the right to make my own judgments."

"Then I reserve the right to spank you."

"I don't think I like that," Zoe said.

"I don't care. I only care about you being alive."

"Well, we both agree on that, but your techniques are..." She rubbed her behind for emphasis. "A bit on the brutal side."

"Don't disobey my direct orders when your life is on the line and I promise I won't spank you. But you blow it, doll, and you *will* pay."

"I see I'm going to have to work on this hard-assed edge of yours."

He grinned. "You can go ahead and work all you want. But honey, for right now, I'm in charge."

"I sooo don't like this side of you, but... unfortunately, I can't do anything about it and... Oh, your lovemaking did a number on my head. Damn, you are one handsome man." She grabbed him and pulled him towards her. She kissed him and all rational thoughts left his head.

He pulled her closer and began to undress her again, but managed to stop himself.

"We have to stick to the case right now. All I want to do is make love to you from dark until dawn, but saving your life is more important. There

will be plenty of time to make love to you. Plenty of time," he promised and then he kissed her again.

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As Zoe drove to the office, she checked her rearview mirror. Reid was right there. She was still in shock. One moment she was over his knee and ready to kill him. The next minute she had her legs wrapped around him. What a strange, but delightful turn of events. She didn't know what would happen between them—she assumed they'd get bored with each other and separate eventually—but there was some niggling doubt about that. She'd never been so overcome with lust that she'd made love to a man in the backseat of his SUV in broad daylight before. She hadn't even questioned it. When he kissed her, all she could think about was ripping off his clothes. It was so surprising. While some part of her had been somewhat attracted to the man, she'd had no idea how voracious her attraction was.

She tried to remember if she'd ever had a relationship begin like this. Nope. Definitely not. Nor had she ever dated a man like Reid before. She'd always dated other professionals. Definitely not a private detective. Nor had she ever dated anyone as rough-edged. There was something about Reid. Something dangerous and unpredictable. Definitely hot. Probably the hottest man she'd ever slept with.

There was also something real about him. There was nothing put-on or made up about him. He wasn't a blowhard, he didn't exaggerate his accomplishments, he was sure of who he was and proud of what he did. He was simple, actually. Straightforward. It seemed like all the men she'd dated previously were intent on proving who they were. Pretending to be someone they weren't. Hyping their credentials, living their lives through their Rolexes and Bentleys. Reid didn't need to

pretend. He was a real man and was very relaxed within his masculinity. It was a refreshing change.

They arrived at the office and walked in together. Zoe hoped no one noticed the way she was with Reid; she tried to put on a professional air.

Happily, most of her colleagues were more concerned about the death threats and attacks. Many came up to wish her well or ask her a question about a case. She needed to get back to work. She missed the office and all her cases. She hoped with this new thread in the investigation, her brother Tad might be able to help them determine who was after her.

She and Reid found Tad in his office. She thought he looked a little disappointed to see her walk in. Maybe he liked being the big cheese, now that she'd had to back off some. He certainly looked like he did. There was something different about his office, too. It looked more... professional. He'd always refused new furnishings, preferring to keep his old desk and filing cabinet, but now it seemed as if he'd changed his mind. He sat behind a much bigger mahogany desk; his furnishings had been greatly upgraded. And he was wearing a much more fashionable suit.

"Hey bro, love the makeover here," she said. She thought her compliments would make him happy, but he looked suspicious.

"I spent my own money on them," he replied, his brow furrowed.

"I wouldn't have cared if you spent the office money, it all looks great. Very professional. Decided to join the modern world, huh?" she joked.

Weirdly enough, he took her joke as an insult. "I was always part of the modern world. You just never noticed."

"What's wrong with you? I'm joking. Chill out, little brother."



"You can stop calling me your little brother, I'm thirty-three."

"Why so hostile? What's wrong?" she asked, concerned. "Too much work?"

"I can handle the work load, fine. Thank you. What's going on? Why are you here? I thought Reid here thought it was too dangerous for you to be here. Something changed?"

She wanted to ask him why he was so defensive, but decided to let it drop. She looked over at Reid, who seemed to be staring a hole through Tad.

"Yeah, we may have a lead on the case. Reid wants to ask you some questions."

"You didn't have to come down here," Tad said, concern lining his youthful face. He was tall and had dark eyes like her, but was blessed with beautiful blonde hair. A good-looking man, even if it was wasted. He really should date more. "You could have called. I don't want you in danger, sis. That's why I hired Reid. Why are you putting her in this kind of danger, Reid? Are the questions you have for me really this important?"

"Yes, they are," Reid replied. "And with me here, I know she'll be safe."

"You didn't keep her very safe this afternoon. I just got off the phone with the police. Someone tried to shoot you? Is this true?" he asked Zoe.

Zoe nodded. "Yeah, it's true. Someone baited me. And it wasn't Reid's fault. I didn't listen to him. I went without telling him."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Tad commented acidly.

"I think she might listen to me now," Reid added.

"I'll bet. Well, I'm so relieved you're okay, Zoe. But why didn't you listen to... oh, never mind. I know why. Because you're pig-headed. So what are

these questions you wanted to ask me?" Tad asked, turning his attentions to Reid.

"How did you come to hire me? Who recommended me to you?" Reid asked.

Tad looked surprised by the question. Taken aback. Zoe couldn't help but wonder why he was acting so weird.

"Uh... why?" Tad asked.

"Just answer him, Tad," Zoe encouraged.

"Uh, I don't really remember. I guess out of the phone book."

"I don't advertise in the phone book," Reid replied.

"Well, I don't know. Oh, wait. I remember," Tad said. "A friend at the club recommended you."

"Who?" Zoe asked.

"What does it matter?" Tad demanded, confused.

"It matters, okay? Who?" Zoe asked.

Tad shrugged. "I still don't understand why—"

Reid said, "Well, it was clear to us today that the person isn't just after your sister, they're after me as well. So, if you could put a little brainpower towards this, it will help us out. Because the person who recommended me could be the one we're after."

Tad's eyes went blank, his jaw dropped. "You think?"

"We both think," Zoe said.

Tad normally remembered everything. It wasn't like him to forget a detail like this. Perhaps he'd taken on too much with Zoe being gone from the office. It was really the only explanation.

"Well, I'm sorry, but with all this extra work with you being gone, my brain's a little scattered," Tad said with a shrug.

"Well, it's very important that you remember. Who at the club?" Zoe pressed.

Tad shook his head. "God, I really don't recall. I'll have to get back to you on that."

"Tad, what's wrong with you?!" Zoe demanded. "You remember everything, I don't—"

"Zoe, it's okay," Reid said, taking her by the arm. "Leave him be. He'll remember. Come on, we have to go check on some things." He began to lead her out of the office.

"Okay, but I don't—"

"Go on, Zoe," Tad encouraged. "I'll call you as soon as I remember. I'll go through my club Rolodex and I'm sure it will come to me."

"Okay, but—"

"Come on, Zoe," Reid said. He led her out of the office.

When they were in the elevator on the way down to the car, Zoe turned to Reid. "Why did you hustle me out of there?"

"Because something is going on with your brother."

"What do you mean by that?" Zoe demanded.

"I think he's protecting someone."

Zoe was floored. "What?"

Reid nodded. "I think he knows exactly who recommended me and I think he's protecting the person."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know."

"He should be protecting me."

"I agree."

"You have to be wrong," Zoe countered.

"Maybe so. But until I'm sure, I don't want you going anywhere, not even to your brother's without me."

"This can't be right. Who would he be protecting?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out."

"This is disturbing."

"Don't worry, Zoe. This time I'll make sure nothing happens to you. But you have to trust me. And tell me whatever your brother tells you. And if he invites you to his place, you call me and I'm going with you."

"Tad wouldn't do anything to hurt me," she protested.

"I don't think so either. But he's protecting someone."

"God, I hope not."

Reid dropped Zoe off at her hotel with explicit orders not to leave. He promised he'd be back within a few hours. With a kiss that nearly knocked her socks off, he left her.

A few hours later, Zoe was watching *Cops* on TV, when her cell phone rang. She checked the number. Tad.

"Yeah, Tad?" she answered.

"Zoe, I need you to get over here, now. I'm at home. We need to talk."

"You sound serious, what's going on? Does this have something to do with the person who's after me?"

"I think so. But I don't want to talk on the phone. Someone could be listening. And come alone. I don't want Daniels to know."

"Why?"

"Zoe stop asking me questions. Your life is on the line. Get over here now."

"Okay, okay. I'll be right there."

Ten minutes later, Zoe was in her car. She was driving out of the parking lot when suddenly, a man jumped in front of her car. She slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt. She was about to scream at the idiot when she realized that it was Reid. He was not happy. He looked like he wanted to annihilate her. The pit of her stomach dropped. He'd better not spank her.

"Get out of the car!" he ordered in a low growl. His carved features were hardened. His thug-like appearance was made even more sinister by his deep anger lines. She'd never been scared by a boyfriend before. This man was truly frightening when mad.

"Uh, I think I'd rather stay in here," she replied. She seriously considered locking the doors.

"I said, get out of the car, *now!*" he demanded loudly, his blue gaze boring into her. He walked up to the driver's side of the car, opened the door and motioned for her to come out.

She reluctantly obeyed.

"Get in the passenger seat."

"Okay." She did as she was told.

Without a word, he drove up to an upper level of the parking garage and parked next to his SUV.

He got out and motioned for her to join him. Dragging her feet, she did so. When she reached the car, she walked up to the passenger side. Reid approached her. She thought he'd open the door for her, but when he opened the back door, she knew what he was up to. She made a break for it and got about a foot away before she felt his steel-like hands grip her shoulders.

Before she knew it, she was in the backseat of his SUV, across his lap. This time, however, he didn't start spanking her right away. This time, he yanked the back of her sweat pants down to her knees and pulled her panties down as well.

When she began kicking and protesting, he let her have it—full force, with his strong open hand. Why had she gotten involved with a spanker? And why did this man light her fire like no man had before? She should hate him for this. But she didn't. He'd told her what he'd do to her if she disobeyed him. While she didn't like it, she knew he was doing

it because he cared about her. And she had to give him credit, he was a man of his word.

The pain was incredible. Who knew spankings could hurt this much?

"You listen to me when I tell you to do something, Zoe!" he ordered, punctuating his statement with some sharp smacks to her behind. "Don't you realize your life is at stake?!" Whack! Whack! Whack!

"I'm sorry!"

"Not good enough! I couldn't stand it if something happened to you! What's wrong with you?! What were you thinking?" he thundered, spanking her even harder.

"Tad wanted to see me!" she cried.

"I told you not to go see him without me! Didn't I tell you that?" Whack! Whack! Whack!

"I'm sorry, Reid," she yelled, tears spilling from her eyes. Her butt felt like a swarm of bees had stung it. She wasn't sure she'd recover from this one.

Reid spanked her and spanked her.

"Reid, stop! I got it! I got it!"

"No, you don't, obviously! I can't stand the thought of you dying! I love you, you little idiot! I love you!" he said, spanking her so hard, she thought she'd lose her mind.

Wait, Reid loved her? He loved her? Had he really said that? Could it be true?

## Dark Threats

### Chapter Three

As Reid spanked Zoe, her mind reverberated with his words. He'd just proclaimed his love for her. Reid? In love with her?

Quite shortly, however, her overwhelmed mind had more to deal with than his proclamations of love. Reid was annihilating her ass. To be fair, she had promised him she'd stay put unless she talked to him first. She did have an unknown assailant after her. One who'd already shot at her, tried to poison her and run her down with their car. And Reid himself—her bodyguard and private detective on the case—had been with her during the last attack. It was at that point that they realized the assailant was after them both.

Shortly after the attack, Reid had spanked her for disobeying him and then made love to her. And now, she'd just disobeyed him for a second time and apparently, had greatly upset him. She didn't blame him for being mad at her, but his caveman act had to stop.

"Reid! Please! I got it! I got it!"

"You'd better!" he yelled, finishing the job on her butt with a few thunderous swats. He pulled her up onto his lap, crushed her in a hug and kissed her hard. When he pulled away, he said, "I can't stand the thought of something happening to you. You have to listen to me. You can't keep running off without telling me where you're going. I have to protect you. I have to. Please, don't ever do that to me again. You promise me. Right now, you promise me. You aren't going anywhere without me. Not until we catch the jerk that's after us. You promise me. Now. Do it."

"I promise! I promise! I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do. Tad practically ordered me over there. He said my life was on the line. He..."

His chiseled face lined with concern, his large pale blue eyes bore into her. "Look, I understand why, but I told you there's something wrong with him. I think he's involved and is protecting the assailant. You have to listen to me. Right now, your brother isn't trustworthy. He's protecting someone and obviously isn't as concerned about your safety as he is about protecting that other person. I know it's asking a lot to trust me over your brother, but please, Zoe, you have to listen to me."

The man truly cared about her. The depth of emotion in his eyes startled her. She'd never had anyone be this passionate about her before. This man was really in love with her. She could see it. Perhaps he wasn't the best at expressing himself, but the story within his eyes said more than words ever could.

"I will. I will," she assured him.

His shoulders relaxed. "Good... good."

He helped her pull her pants back up. He kissed her again.

"Okay, I'm coming with you," he told her. "Tell me exactly what your brother said."

Zoe wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "He just said that I was to get over to his place immediately. He had some information and said that my life was on the line. He also said that he didn't want you knowing. He specifically told me not to tell you that I was going over there. He also seemed concerned that his phone was tapped."

Reid sat and processed the information. His sandy blonde brows drew together. "Why wouldn't he want me knowing? He hired me. And how did his phone get tapped? Why didn't he tell me? Something is definitely going on with him. He's



involved with this up to his neck. This isn't good, Zoe. Tell you what, let's pretend that you didn't run into me."

"Okay."

"Now here's what we'll do..." Reid said and began outlining his plan.

---

Ten minutes later, Zoe was at her brother's door. She hoped Reid was wrong. She hoped Tad had nothing to do with her attacks. She rang the doorbell. And waited. And waited. She rang again. A few minutes later, still nothing.

She shrugged and tried to look in his front windows. The curtains were drawn, but it looked like there were lights on inside.

"Tad?" Still nothing. "Tad?!" she said louder. She began to get worried. She was tempted to break in, but she wanted Reid to know what was going on.

She walked back to the car and got inside. She called Reid on her cell.

"Reid?"

"He didn't answer?" came Reid's voice.

"No."

"This doesn't feel right. Something's gone wrong."

"I want to get inside and see if he's okay. I'm worried about him," Zoe said.

"Let me think here a minute. This just makes no sense."

"How about if I go around the back and see what's going on?"

"No. How about if you stay there and I'll look around the back. I don't want you hurt."

"Well, I don't want you hurt, either."

"I can take care of myself. I'm the professional here. Remember?"

"Okay. What should I do?"

"Just sit tight. I'll call you when I'm inside the house."

"Okay. Be careful, Reid."

"Don't worry, Zoe. I've been in more dangerous situations than this before."

"I don't really want to think about that."

She heard him chuckle. "I'll call you right back," he said.

Zoe watched as a darkened figure crept along the fence and then disappeared into Tad's backyard. If she hadn't been looking for him, she wouldn't have seen him. Her new boyfriend truly was a professional.

Her. New. Boyfriend. Who, in the heat of passion, had told her that he loved her. She should have grilled him afterwards to make sure he really felt that way, but the danger of the situation had taken precedence.

She thought about her new relationship with the man. Her heart swelled with joy. This was a man she could stay with, build a future with. This was the first man she'd met she could picture staying with for a lifetime. In all of her thirty-six years, Reid was the first man who seemed worthy of her love. She'd known it as soon as the words had escaped his lips. She loved him, too. What a strange turn of events.

Five minutes later, Zoe was getting concerned. It shouldn't have taken Reid that long to get inside the house.

Suddenly, the door opened and Reid got into her back seat. She didn't see that it was him—it was too dark in the car—but who else could it be?

"Oh, Reid, you scared me. What—"

Like lightening, Reid reached around the seat with a rag in his hand and clamped it over her mouth and nose. She smelled a sickeningly sweet odor. She fought him, but he got her in a good hold.

As she began to lose consciousness, she looked in the rear view mirror. A man in a ski mask glared back at her. *Oh, God, the assailant!* was her last conscious thought.

---

Reid woke up to pain. His head throbbing wildly, he realized that he was lying on a lawn, feeling cold and clammy. He ran his hand over golf-ball sized lump on the back of his head. His hand came away wet. He checked his palm—blood.

Oh, God, if this happened to him, what about Zoe? Panic set in. *Zoe!* Zoe was in danger! He leapt to his feet—wobbled a bit—but quickly regained his senses. He tried to piece together what had happened. He'd been just about to enter the house through the back door when someone surprised him with a blow to the back of the head. It was the last thing he remembered.

As Reid raced out to the street, he whipped out his cell phone and called Zoe. No answer. He dashed to where her car had been parked. Gone.

He immediately returned to the back of the house and broke a window. He climbed inside and quickly checked the inside of the large rancher.

It looked like a bomb had gone off in the house. Furniture was upturned; there was a swath of damage through several rooms. It looked like a huge struggle had taken place. Tad was nowhere to be seen. Reid checked the garage, Tad's Mercedes was still parked there, the hood cold. He checked Tad's bedroom, it was untouched. A Rolex sat on the dresser. So the assailant was not a robber. This was about something else.

Reid listened to the answering machine for clues. There were a bunch of calls from the office, an interior decorator and a delivery message for a new stereo. The last message popped out at him.

"Tad, this is Mike up at Camp Pescadero? Your cabin is ready for you. Glad you're finally coming up, we've missed you guys around here. So the stove is ready, the place is cleaned up, pilot light lit and my wife got those groceries you requested. The place is all ready to go. See you when you get here." Beep.

Zoe's family had a place up in the mountains, just an hour out of the city. That's where Zoe would be. He realized he was staking a lot on this one clue, but something in his gut told him to get there and get there fast.

---

Zoe woke up feeling sick. She tried to move and realized that she was sitting in a chair, bound and blindfolded. Adrenaline powered through her veins; her stomach knotted. She wasn't going to live to see the next day, she just knew it.

Suddenly, from behind her, she heard someone's footsteps. She tensed. A glass was pressed to her lips. She jerked back, but the person was patience and offered the glass again. Feeling parched and ill, she accepted the water. It was cool, but tasted a bit bitter.

The glass was taken away. "Who are you? What do you want?"

No answer. The person walked away.

"Why won't you answer me?"

No reply. Her assailant walked into another room.

As Zoe shook off the nausea, she tuned into her surroundings. She took a deep sniff, but unfortunately, she could only smell formaldehyde. She took several more deep breaths and eventually other scents began to surface. Pine. Fresh cut wood. Smoke. There was another scent. Cedar.

All at once, she knew where she was. The family cabin. She'd know those scents anywhere. She'd spent every summer there as a child and as a teenager. What the hell was the kidnapper doing, taking her to her family cabin?

There was only one answer. Reid was right. Somehow, some way, Tad was involved. But that made no sense. Tad loved her. Tad always protected her. Tad was her only living relative now that her parents were gone. He couldn't possibly be involved. But she was in her own cabin and she knew it.

She decided to try something. "Tad? Get in here and explain yourself," she barked in a commanding tone.

She heard some glass break from the other room. Her heart sank. Tad was involved. And was there. And had just been shocked by her accusation. Maybe. She hoped she was wrong.

She heard the person stalk into the room and stop just behind her. She caught the scent of the man's cologne. Xeryus. Very exclusive, Tad's scent. Tears stung her eyes.

"Tad, I know it's you. What the hell are you doing?"

She felt a tug at the blindfold. They were checking to make sure it was secure.

"No, I didn't see you. I know we're at the cabin, I'd know this smell anywhere. And you're the only one I know who wears Xeryus."

A stifled sound of frustration. The person stomped into the other room.

"Tad, you get back here and untie me. If you stop this crap and stop now, I won't press charges. You agree to counseling and this stays between us. You continue on and I won't be able to help you. Now get back in here and untie me. Do it now!" she ordered fiercely.

She heard a door slam close. Was it Tad? It had to be. Who else? She took a deep breath and tried to clear her head. She began working on her bonds. They were tied tightly, but she could move a bit. She rotated her wrists and little by little, began to loosen the ropes. She had to get free and do it fast. If it was Tad, he'd clearly lost his mind. Who knew what else he might do?

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Reid followed the long dirt road that led to the isolated cabin. He had no idea how far up the road he needed to go. He wanted to stop before he reached the house so he could sneak up on the place.

As he came around a bend, he saw lights far up in the distance. He turned off the dusty, pitted road and parked. He got out of the car, grabbed his gun and his stun gun and headed off for the cabin.

As he approached the cabin, he saw Zoe's car parked out front. She was here! He had to be careful; Tad might have accomplices watching the place.

Reid circled the cabin once before approaching it. He hadn't seen anyone outside. He carefully snuck up on the porch and moved up to a window.

His heart leapt into his throat. Zoe was in the middle of the large rustic living room, tied to a chair and blindfolded. There was no one else in the room.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement. He reacted, but it was too late. Intense pain rocked his skull. Someone knocked him hard across the side of the head with a large metal implement. He fell against the side of cabin, and looked up just in time to see Tad bearing down on him with a shovel.

Zoe heard the crashing on the front porch and knew something bad had happened. She continued to work on her bonds, but began feeling very dizzy.

Very nauseous. The water! It had something in it! Damn it!

But why had Tad poisoned her? Why allow her to wake up at all? Why not just dump her body somewhere?

The door opened somewhere in front of her. She jumped at a sudden loud noise. Something had been thrown to the floor.

"Tad? What the hell is going on?"

Whack! She was slapped across the face.

"Ow! Tad, what's wrong with you?!" While she addressed her attacker as Tad, she still wasn't sure it was him.

Finally, the person spoke. "Okay, fine. It's all over, anyway."

Black clouds of doom shaded her heart. Even though she'd guessed it was him, she still couldn't believe it. What had happened to her dear brother?

"Oh, now the ball-busting tough girl starts crying. Oh, stop. We both know you have no feelings."

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded through her tears. "What happened to you?"

"What do you mean what happened to me? You and Dad happened to me, that's what happened. Don't pretend to be surprised." His voice dripped with venom. "You guys ruined me. Ruined my life. Both of you picking on me. Picking, picking, picking. Always criticizing me. Stand up for yourself, Tad. You're a wuss, Tad. What's the matter, Tad? Aren't you a real man, Tad? Well, yes, I am real man and I'm just about to prove that to you, Big Sis. Of course, no one else may know just how tough I am, but that doesn't matter. They'll all see when the business still thrives without you and dear old Dad."

"Are you nuts? You can't get away with this."

"I *am* getting away with this. That bastard Daniels is outside, unconscious, as we speak. You

all think I'm so stupid. Well, I'm not. I have this perfectly planned out. And I didn't involve anyone but myself. I'm smart. No one will talk because you and your new boyfriend will be long gone. And boy, will I be glad when you and that creep are finally out of my hair."

"What the hell did Reid do to you?"

"Nothing. Unless you consider shooting the only man I've ever loved nothing. I vowed I'd get that bastard for what did to me. And when I realized that you had to go, a perfect plan formed in my head. Now all I have to do is throw both of you into the creek and my job's done. Everyone will think it's that unknown assailant, the case will go unsolved and I'm home free. I get the whole business to myself and my revenge, all in one shot."

"You're gay?"

He snorted. "You're so stupid. None of you really knew me. You just ordered me around like your little slave boy. Well, I'm not stupid and I'm not your flunky anymore. I'm the boss of the business, the boss of my life and you and Dad will finally be gone. I couldn't be happier."

While overwhelmed, Zoe knew she had to keep Tad talking. She was almost free of her bonds.

"Reid shot your boyfriend? How? Why?"

"Because my boyfriend had gotten mixed up with some meth freaks. Reid was working for the FBI at that time, was busting the guys and accidentally—or so the record states—accidentally shot Jim during a raid on the drug lab. Jim was innocent, just in the wrong place at the wrong time and your trigger-happy boyfriend got away with it. So I started doing those attacks on you and hired him to protect you. I knew I could get both of you in one shot and that's exactly what I'm doing."



"Oooo, I'm dizzy," she said, indeed, feeling woozy. But she put on more of an effect so that Tad would think she was defenseless.

"Good. That was just some Rohypnol. I want you nice and easy for me to drown."

"You are freakin' sick, Tad. When did you decide all this?"

"Oh, I've dreamed about this for years. The first time I tried, I was just a kid."

"You pushed me off that roof! I knew someone pushed me off the roof!"

"Yeah, but unfortunately, I thought I was pushing you onto the driveway and you landed in that tree."

"Jesus Christ, you were only fourteen. You've hated me this much since then?"

"Before actually. I don't think I've ever liked you. In fact, I think I've hated you my whole life."

"My God."

"Yeah, you'd better start praying, because you're just about to meet your maker, dear sister."

He walked out of the room. Zoe quickly finished with her bonds. Her hands freed, she ripped off the blindfold and untied her feet.

She'd just gotten up, when Tad came back into the room. She was dizzy, but still fairly lucid.

He became enraged when he saw her. He raced towards her. She dashed behind the chair, picked it up and slammed him with it.

He deflected the chair with his arm, leapt forward and grabbed her. She reached up and scratched his face, raking her nails across his cheek. He screamed and pushed her so hard, she fell to the floor, knocking her head against the wooden surface. Nasty pain seared her face; white lights danced across her eyes; her vision grayed out.

Semi-conscious, she was barely aware of him picking her up. He carried her out the door and

down across the porch. She knew he was heading to the creek behind the house. She began screaming for help.

"Oh, shut up, no one can hear you."

"I can," came a voice from behind him.

Reid! Zoe was thrown to the cold, soft pine-needle strewn ground. In the light coming from the cabin, she saw the outline of the two men fighting. She grew dizzier. The Rohypnol was taking effect.

She fought for consciousness. Near her was a rock. She picked it up and got to her feet, swaying.

The two men continued their fight. It was very dark and hard to distinguish the two. One came reeling back towards her, having been punched by the other. She didn't have time to move and the man crashed into her, sending her to the ground. It was Reid.

Reid leapt to his feet, just as Tad came for him. Tad punched at him, he ducked, Tad's fist missed him by a hair.

They were right upon her, fighting. She scooted away, got to her feet again and grabbed the rock. It was clear Reid was losing the fight. As the light caught his face, she could see blood running down his cheek. His temple had a huge contusion on it. Tad knocked him to the ground, leapt on him and began punching him.

A wave of dizziness overcame Zoe. She fell to the ground and began to lose consciousness. She knew if she didn't fight the drug, both she and Reid were goners. With every bit of her strength, she somehow got to her feet. She gripped the rock tightly.

Below her, Tad was beating Reid, who was clearly on the verge of losing consciousness again. She raised the rock high in the air and with all her might she came down on the back of Tad's head.

There was a sickening thud sound, Tad gave an agonizing cry and fell to his side. She dropped to her knees and crawled to Reid's side.

"Reid, Reid, are you all right?"

"Yeah," he rasped. "What about you? Zoe, are you okay?"

"I'm just about to pass out. He gave me a roofie," she said as she fell to her side.

"I'll take care of Tad. You rest. I'll take care of everything. And Zoe? You just saved my life."

"And you saved mine. I love you, Reid." She passed out.

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Zoe awoke to bright lights. She was in a hospital. She shook off the dizziness and checked the room. Reid, his head covered in bandages, was sleeping in the corner of her room. He woke up just then. When he saw she was awake, a huge smile came over his handsome, chiseled face. He immediately got to his feet and came over to her.

He took her hand and kissed it. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm so glad you're okay. I nearly lost my mind when I woke up in Tad's backyard."

"What happened?"

"After I left you, I walked around the back, was just about to get into the house when Tad clobbered me on the back of the head with something."

"I'm so sorry." Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Honey, don't. Don't worry."

"Kinda hard not to worry when your brother's a criminal."

"Actually, he's..."

"What? What?" Zoe demanded.

"You know that case you've been working? That Johnson guy who you were sure was innocent and set up for that crime?"

"No."

"I'm afraid so. The reason Tad didn't want you on that case was because he was the real culprit."

"But he's gay!"

"Yes, that has nothing to do with it. It was a handywoman he'd hired to fix a few things around his house. She found the plans he'd drawn up regarding the... uh, disposal of you and me."

Zoe collapsed against her pillows, tears now freely streaming down her face.

"I'm so sorry, Zoe," Reid said.

"God, I can't believe it. I didn't even know him. Not at all. You know he tried to do this when we were kids? He hated me even back then. All this animosity and I had no idea. This is a nightmare. Is he in jail?"

Reid nodded. "Oh, yeah. The police found all his plans. And with my testimony, he's going to go away for a very long time."

"Oh, my God. I can't believe all this."

"Me, neither."

"There's only one good thing to come out of this," she said.

He grinned. "I hope you're talking about me."

She smiled. "Yeah. You."

"Do you really love me?" he asked, a slightly insecure edge to his voice.

She looked deep into his wide blue gaze. "I love you more than anyone I've ever loved, Reid. I didn't think this kind of love was possible for me."

His shoulders sagged with relief. "I know this probably isn't the best time, but I can't wait. Will you marry me?"

"Yes, definitely yes."

He lit up like a thousand watt bulb. "I love you, Zoe," he said.

"I love you, Reid."

## Caught

### Chapter One

Stefan watched her on the closed circuit TV as she poked around his antiques room. What was she up to? Now she was moving on to the next room, the one he expected her to investigate, his private office. Little did she know that his "private office" was a fake. His true private office was in the attic, where he was right then, watching her on his surveillance system.

He knew she'd return. He hadn't missed the quick impression in wax she'd made of his side door key, the way she looked at his home, the complete incongruity with her appearance and her stated occupation: a termite inspector. Of course, he had a battery of cameras that helped him with his observations.

Yes, he'd called for a termite inspection. No, she didn't fit the bill. He still didn't know what she was after, but she was after something.

She was certainly a cute little thing. Bright red hair; pale oval face; pert little nose and a shapely figure. She was clearly a private investigator and not one of the law-abiding ones. Probably working for his ex-wife. Caroline was certain he'd hidden a huge amount of money from her. She was correct about that, but it was nothing her little private detective would find.

She wasn't bad at her job, this woman. The way she'd disabled his surveillance system had been ingenious and quick. Her only mistake was assuming he had one surveillance system, controlled by one panel in one room. He actually had four separate surveillance systems, all controlled from various places in his home. She'd only found the most obvious. The others were hidden. Of course, no one truly understood how well

protected he was. He had to be. He had far too much to lose.

What was funny was how brazen she was, now that she thought the surveillance system had been compromised. She picked things up, opened drawers and left her fingerprints everywhere. She obviously didn't intend to take anything.

She frowned. She'd thoroughly checked his office and had found nothing since there was nothing to find. She collapsed behind the desk and began work on his computer. Ten minutes later, she shook her head and looked up. She did a slow visual inspection of the room.

Had she figured it out yet? That she was in a room dressed as his office? He turned up the sound in the room.

"This makes no sense," she said, carefully inspecting every square inch of the office from her chair. "Computer has nothing on it... no files..." Her mouth dropped open, she snapped her fingers. "Damn him, this is a fake set-up. This isn't his office at all. Oh, he's good. Very, very good. Damn it. So where the hell is his real office? Even Caroline doesn't know this isn't his real office. He's good enough to fool even her. Crap. Wish I was working for him."

That answered that question. Caroline had hired her. Now satisfied that he'd solved the mystery of her employer, it was time to play with his little spy.

He called his butler, Jacob, whom he knew would be up watching Leno.

"Jacob? Sorry to bother you, but we have an intruder."

"Shall I call the police, sir?" his English butler drawled, seeming completely unperturbed about this late night disturbance.

Stefan smiled to himself. "No, I'd rather play with this one."

"Very good, sir."

"She's in my office on the first floor. Let's shoo her upstairs, shall we?" Stefan suggested.

"Very good, sir. I shall approach from the antiques room, then go around back of the dining hall and encourage our unwanted visitor upstairs. Shall I wait at the bottom of the stairs for more orders?"

"Excellent, Jacob. I'll call you there."

"Very good, sir."

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Daphne was perplexed. So the guy had another office somewhere, did he? Since she was there, and the butler was tucked safely into bed, this was a golden opportunity to snoop. She had to find that other office.

She got up and put the chair back where she'd found it and set everything else right in the office. Just as she closed a file drawer, she heard it. A noise was coming from the next room where all the man's antiques were kept. She stopped and listened.

"Is anyone there?" came a voice.

Adrenaline slammed her system. She darted out of the office and into the dining room. From behind her, she heard that voice again. "Is anyone here? Mr. Devane? Is that you?"

Christ, it was the butler! What alerted him? She had to get out of there!

She tiptoed across the vast dining room, heading for the entry hall, which would take her to the TV room, which would lead her to that side door.

She left the dining hall and walked quickly and quietly across the entry hall.

"I say, is anyone there?" It sounded like he was right behind her in the dining hall.

This was horrible! He was just about to find her, and she had nowhere to go. Panicked, she made the only choice she could: she raced up the carpeted stairs.

As soon as she reached the second floor landing, she saw the butler below her. She dropped and flattened to the floor.

"Sir? Sir?"

Daphne didn't even breathe.

"Mr. Devane, are you there? That's funny; I would have sworn I heard someone. Hmm, maybe it was back in the dining hall. No, it wasn't. Maybe it was upstairs."

*Auuuughhhh!* She belly crawled across the landing. She scooted quickly into a hallway that went to the east wing of the house. As soon as she got out of his line of sight, she got up and ran.

She raced down a very long corridor, hung a left and stopped. She peered around the corner to see if the butler was following her. So far, nothing. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Well, she had to check the upstairs anyway, since she hadn't found what she was looking for downstairs. Hopefully, the butler would stay put. She'd have to be careful and quiet.

She was in the east wing, which was the guest wing. She knew each of the fourteen rooms off the hallway she'd just passed were guest rooms. No one on staff ventured around this wing unless Stefan had guests, which was infrequent. At least, according to the housekeeper, the stout older woman who'd accompanied her on her "termite inspection."

Maybe the big man's office was somewhere here on the second floor. Maybe even that third floor. Maybe he had a hidden room or something somewhere. Many rich people had panic rooms.



Ahead of her was a staircase that led to the third floor. If she was rich and had money to hide, where would she put her office? Upstairs, out of reach of everyone.

During her termite inspection, she'd searched the entire third floor. She thought back now to potential hiding places. Truthfully, she hadn't thought too much about the other floors, having encountered what she thought was his office within the first five minutes of her inspection. From what she remembered, he had a study on the third floor and his bedroom. Both prime targets for hidden rooms.

Her fantasies of discovering a secret room excited her. A spring in her step, Daphne climbed the stairs to the third floor and headed to his private study. Half of the fun of her job was brought about by her active imagination. While working, she pretended to be in much more dangerous situations, to spice up the job because, normally, her job wasn't very exciting at all. Nor was this job, quite frankly. While the man had just provided her with a new mystery, she knew she'd solve it. She always solved her cases. Like her dad always said, she was just too damned smart.

She walked down the long, darkened hallways with their deep rich burgundy carpeting. The walls were carved mahogany with exquisite artwork placed everywhere. The place reeked of money.

She reached his study and opened the door. The room was dark. She took out her flashlight and began her investigation. She checked all the bookcases, but couldn't find any openings. She felt alongside each one, looking for a telltale crack that would indicate a hidden door. Nothing. He had no computer in the room, no file cabinets, just books upon books.

After a frustrating half hour, Daphne gave up and left the room. It was time to check his bedroom. She had watched the master of the house leave earlier and overheard him tell his butler that he'd be gone for the night. It was all so easy.

She opened the door to his bedroom and sauntered inside, totally relaxed. Surely, the butler was safely back in bed by now. A light was on next to Stefan's bed. Weird. Maybe it was on a timer, she shouldn't worry. Hell, he was rich enough to leave every light on in the entire house at all times if he wanted to.

Daphne spent a good twenty minutes going over every square inch of his bedroom. The only interesting thing she found was a drawer of fun-looking sex toys. The boy obviously liked to play. He had fur-lined ankle and wrist restraints and a vast array of whips and paddles. They weren't the tools of a sadist, just the toys of a man who loved power games. The man's interests clearly dovetailed nicely with hers. Of course, she just liked to play at the B/D games, she wasn't into pain much, but there was nothing more fun than to be tied to a bed and tormented by a skilled lover.

A shiver of lust raced through her at the thought of making love to Stefan Devane. Caroline was crazy for leaving him for a younger man. While fifty, Stefan had to be one of the most handsome men in the universe. And rich. And now that Daphne had found out about his little kinky side, she wished she could spend a little time with the hunk. She glanced over at the bed and had a little mini-fantasy of her and Stefan in several inventive positions.

When she'd first met him, it had taken all her resolve not to gawk. He was tall, had shoulder length dark hair speckled with gray and gray eyes that made her knees weak. He looked like a movie star. But she'd kept up her front and acted like the

consummate professional. He hadn't suspected a thing. Of course, Daphne was good. In her fifteen years in the business, she'd never been caught doing anything illegal.

After giving Stefan's bedroom one more once over, she gave up. It was probably too obvious. Stefan was smarter.

She opened his bedroom door to leave and screamed.

Stefan Devane stood there in the doorway with a very unfriendly look on his face. A determined look in his eye, he stepped towards her—all she could do was back up into his bedroom.

She had no idea what to say, what to do. This had never happened to her before. She had no excuse for her presence, no reason to explain what she was doing in the man's bedroom. She was caught.

Stefan was thrilled. Her expression was perfect. Abject terror. Her mouth gaped open; her eyes were wide with fear, all the color had left her face. He loved playing games, especially power games. And now that he had a gorgeous pigeon in his bedroom, who knew what was in store for her?

He took out his cell phone, his eyes never leaving hers. He pressed a button. "Jacob, I won't be needing you for the rest of the evening. I've got the intruder handled. You may retire." Jacob bid him good night, and Stefan hung up the phone and turned it off.

She was thinking of escaping. Her eyes darted towards the door that led to his bathroom.

"Don't even think about it," he said, trying to sound ominous and angry.

He continued to walk towards her. She backed up, shaking and pale, trying to figure out how to

escape. But there was no way out for her. He'd locked all the doors.

Finally, she backed up into the wall. He continued to move forward, stopping just in front of her, standing at his full height to make her feel as small as possible.

He leaned into her, put his hand on the wall next to her head and glared down at her. Trapped. Sweat broke out on her forehead; her breathing became ragged and shallow. This was so much fun!

"W-what do you want?" she stammered, shrinking down inside her black sweatshirt.

"I want to know what you're looking for," he answered in a slow, careful drawl.

"Uh... I... left my... wallet—"

He let out a chuckle, but made sure not to smile.

She sighed heavily, her shoulders drooped. "Oh, crap. Call the police, and I'll call my lawyer." She took her cell phone out of her pocket.

He ripped it out of her grip. "I don't think so, Miss Burglar. I think I'm going to settle this in-house."

Slack-jawed, her beautiful eyes dilated. "W-what? What are you talking about?"

"I think I can handle this little indiscretion of yours all by myself." He tried for a menacing tone. "You broke into the wrong house, honey, and shortly, you are going to understand that little fact."

He didn't even see it coming. She stepped on his foot, punched him in the stomach and pushed him out of the way. By the time he recovered, she'd tried all three doors of his room. When she realized they were locked, she panicked. She came at him again, fists flying.

He finally got his breath back; his instincts took over. As she swung at him, he grabbed her wrist, pulled her towards him, flipped her around and got her in a tight hold.

While she screamed bloody murder, he picked her up, threw her on the bed, jumped on top of her and pinned her there on her stomach. He'd played this game many times with various lovers. But he'd never played it for real like this. A thrill went through him.

While she protested and threatened all sorts of horrible retribution, he grabbed each wrist in turn and wrestled them into the hidden restraints built into his bed. After he got her wrists secured, he moved down and locked her ankles into the restraints at the foot of his massive bed.

He sat back and gloated for a while as she struggled and swore and fought.

After a couple moments, he said, "Hush up, you. Now, I've got some questions, and you're going to answer them."

Red-faced and furious, she spat, "No, I'm not. You let me go! This is illegal!"

He laughed, a deep roaring belly laugh at the absurdity of her statements. "Ironical, coming from you, you little intruder. Let's just see what you've got in your pockets. Maybe that will answer some of my questions." He reached into her back pocket, but she tore herself away by squirming. He slapped her butt a good one.

"Ow! You can't do that!" she hurled at him.

"Oh, no?" He spanked her a few more good ones, fully enjoying the feel of her taut rear end against the flat of his palm. He was going to have a lot of fun with this before he let her go.

She finally lay still. "Ow! Okay, okay! I'll stop moving!"

"That's better." He reached into her pocket again and pulled out her wallet. He checked the rest of her pockets. He especially enjoyed checking her front pockets; the feel of her hard abs and hipbones caused his loins to stir. This little girl was cute!

He sat back and examined his findings. He opened her wallet. Daphne Goddard. Private detective license. Credit cards, three hundred bucks in cash and pictures of some children.

"Are these kids yours?"

She turned away and wouldn't respond. He reached back behind him and came down with his open palm on her rounded buns, smacking her full force.

"Ow!" she exclaimed. "No! They're not my kids. My nieces and nephew. I don't have any kids."

"Is Goddard your married name?"

Defeated, she collapsed on the bed and said in a rather dismal tone, "I'm not married. I divorced the idiot three years ago. Goddard is my maiden name."

Excellent. So his pigeon was unmarried. This just got better and better.

"So who hired you, and what are you looking for?"

She sighed heavily. But said nothing.

"You'd better talk to me," he said.

She turned away and tensed her whole body, awaiting his strike.

He grinned. She played into his hands perfectly. He got up, walked over to his favorite drawer and withdrew a nice, long leather paddle.

His movements caused her to turn to him to see what he was doing. When she saw what he had in his hands, her eyes got wide.

"So now, Miss Goddard, you're going to tell me everything I want to know," he informed her.

"Goddamn you, you can't do this to me!" she raged.

He reached back and let her have it full force with the leather paddle across both buns.

"Ye-ow! Stop that!" she demanded.

"No. I won't," he replied calmly. "You will tell me what I want to know, or I'm going to pull those

pants right off you and swat you bare-bottomed with my friend here until you talk."

"You can't do this to me! This is illegal!"

He laughed again. "And breaking and entering isn't? What about making a key to someone's house? What about impersonating a termite inspector? Or the vandalism to my surveillance system?"

"Goddamn you!"

He swatted her with the paddle.

"Ow!"

"Don't swear at me, little Miss. Or I will turn that perfect little tush of yours black and blue."

"You can't do this to me!" she exclaimed.

He spanked her a few good ones. The paddle felt great in his hand, and her cries of pain were imminently rewarding.

"I can't what?" he taunted.

"Okay, okay. So you can. Ow."

He laughed. "Good. Now whom are you working for?"

She started to say something but stopped herself. "No, goddamn it, you are not going to win here."

"Oh, no?"

He walked over to her, grabbed her pants and yanked them down to her knees.

"Stop!"

"No." He grabbed the back of her undies and swept them down to her thighs. He took a sharp intake of breath at the sight of her amazing behind. He could feel himself get hard. She was beautiful.

"Goddamn you!" she cried.

"Tell me what I want to know or suffer the consequences, Miss Goddard. Or I could call the police and have you arrested for trespassing, assault and any number of additional charges. Whom do you think they will believe? Me, the

person who donated the money for that new jail? Or a scrappy private eye that's probably upset them in the past?"

"Damn it..." she muttered.

"Now talk," he said, punctuating his question with a sharp blow with the paddle.

"Ye-ow!" she exclaimed. "No! I won't talk! I refuse to give in to this! To give in to you! You suck!"

"Have it your way." He spanked her in rapid succession with the paddle, a good six or seven times. Pink rectangular impressions of the paddle showed nicely against the lovely alabaster skin of her ample rear.

"Ow, ow, ow, stop it!" she yelled. "You bastard, stop that!"

Now incensed, he thundered into her behind with awesome strikes, at least ten good ones. She shrieked in pain and protest.

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry, you're not a bastard! Your ex-wife hired me, your ex-wife!"

"That's better." The reddish glow of her perfectly rounded buns deepened in color from his assault. Gorgeous. All he could think about was unfastening the ankle restraints, pushing her up on her knees and making love to her. This woman was so hot! "And what did she hire you to do?"

She sniffed and wiped some tears on his pillow. "Find the money. She knows you have a bunch hidden from her. She wants documentation she can give to her lawyer. She... wants a piece of you. Now, I know why, if you used that thing on her."

"I only used this on her when she asked," he clarified. "I normally only use this on the willing. But in your case, I've made a delicious exception."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're enjoying this."

"Very much."



She looked defeated. She laid her head down his pillow and sighed. "I had to pick a spanker. Of all the people I pick to cross, you had to be a spanker. This is not my night."

*It could be your night, indeed, my dear.* The cute little thing had no idea she was about to be interviewed for a very fun position as his new girlfriend. She was darling, this girl. Spunky, smart, and a bit disobedient. But she'd soon see the error of her ways.

"When did she hire you?" Stefan asked.

"Last week."

"And what are you going to tell her?"

"That I found nothing," Daphne replied in a depressed tone.

"Now, you lie to me." He spanked her a few times, this time with his open hand. He luxuriated in the feel of her soft, warm flesh against his palm.

"Ow! Ow! I'm not lying!"

He spanked her a few more.

"I'll quit the freakin' case! I'll quit the freakin' case! You big, stupid bully!"

"When are you going to learn? You break into my house," he said spanking her a good, hard one. She shrieked. "You assault me, you call me names." Spank, spank, spank. "And I'm the big stupid bully?" He swatted her several more times.

"Ow! Okay, okay!" she exclaimed, her voice cracking. "I'm sorry! You're not a big bully! I blew it! I'll leave you alone!"

"You bet your little red ass, you will."

"God, that hurts. I promise, I'll shut up, and I won't bother you. You win. You completely win, I capitulate."

He smiled. "Finally."

There was a pause as he took in the sight of her fine body. Muscles taut, skin so smooth. Such a wonderful picture. He had this beautiful, repentant

woman tied to his bed, her ass cheeks bright red and so inviting. What an awesome night!

"So, are you going to let me up?"

He thought a bit. He should let her go. She'd paid the price and now, if he were playing fair, he'd let her go with a warning. But he didn't want to let her go. Was there a chance the little thing was as entranced with him as he was with her? Many women were attracted to him, but this private detective? He wasn't sure.

He'd play with her a bit and see how she reacted. If she didn't want to play, it would be clear. But on the off chance that she wanted to have some fun, it would be well worth it to find out.

"So? Are you going to let me up?"

He smiled and then he made his move.

"Eventually."

This got her attention. She examined his face carefully. She wasn't afraid of him, that was clear. Promising. "What do you mean, eventually?"

"You've been a very, very bad girl, Miss Goddard. Yes, I've punished you, but that was to get you to respect me and answer my questions. There is still the question of... punishment for your crimes against me."

"But—"

"Quiet. For right now, you will not speak until you are spoken to, do you understand?" He held up the paddle for her to see.

She quickly said, "Yes."

She wasn't protesting like she should if she really wanted to be let go. "Good girl. You handle this right and you may end up coming out ahead on this little adventure of yours. But first, you need to understand just what kind of a man I am."

He walked over and sat down on the bed next to her. He reached out and gently began massaging her rear. The feel of her flesh under his touch lit his

loins on fire. Damn, he hoped she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He watched carefully for her reaction. She didn't flinch, and he certainly wasn't turning her off. She looked like she enjoyed it. Very promising!

"Now, if you're a good girl, you'll be rewarded. But if you're a bad girl..." He took his hand away, and she braced herself. He spanked her several times with his open hand, increasing the intensity with each strike. But he didn't hit her nearly as hard as he had before.

He stopped and began gently massaging her rear again. "So it's up to you, Miss Goddard, are you going to be a good girl or a bad girl?"

## Caught Chapter Two

"So it's up to you, Miss Goddard, are you going to be a good girl or a bad girl?" Stefan Devane purred as he stroked her bare behind.

Daphne couldn't believe this whole scene. Here she was, tied face-down to billionaire Stefan Devane's bed, her pants around her knees, her rear end stinging from the man's spanking.

This wasn't how she thought her night would turn out. All she'd wanted was to find his secret office. She'd seen him leave his palatial mansion for the evening. She'd easily gotten into his house and had been in the process of searching it when the man had arrived home and found her in his bedroom. After a fight, he'd tied her to his bed and spanked her.

But now it seemed as if the man had gotten done with punishing her and wanted to play. It was the weirdest experience of her life to date, but for some reason, she wasn't afraid. For some reason, she trusted the man. She instinctively knew he wouldn't hurt her.

And quite frankly, Daphne had never been more turned on in her life. She'd played scenes like this before, but not with this edge of realism. While the spanking had hurt, she could tell that the man was no sicko. He was playing the role of disciplinarian. Operative word there: playing. He'd eased off with those last spans. He was now playing a game, teasing her, testing her. She knew if she protested, really protested, he'd let her go. He liked her. At least, she thought he liked her. Why else would he start playing with her?

"So? Miss Goddard? Good girl or bad girl?" he reiterated, running a hand lightly over her burning flesh.

"Uh..." she said for lack of anything else to say.

"She doesn't know?" he asked, teasing her. He continued to rub her bottom. As he watched her face carefully for her reaction, he dipped a finger down between her legs.

She took a deep intake of breath, and he laughed. Could he feel how wet she was?

"If she's a good girl, she'll get many rewards," he continued. "But if she's a bad girl," he took hold of the paddle and spanked her with it. Just on that perfect edge between pain and pleasure.

When he stopped, he smiled. "I think Miss Goddard likes to play at being a bad girl but is really a good girl."

Then, to her complete and utter shock, he leaned down and kissed her. She nearly fainted with excitement.

When he pulled away, his grey eyes were dark with lust. He kissed her again, much more deeply this time.

This was promising, very, very promising.

"I think I want to punish the bad little girl," he said, his voice silky and smooth. Had he picked up on her excitement?

He spanked her a good one, sent her an indecipherable look, then reached down and yanked up her pants and her panties. Some part of her was disappointed. Guess he gave up on the playing idea. She must have turned him off somehow. Oh, well. It wouldn't have worked, anyway. Rich successful handsome men did not date private detectives. They only hired them. Yet, he was still giving her what she was sure was "the eye."

"I think I've made my point." He unfastened her wrists and ankles.

She got off the bed to rub her wrists and her tender behind. He moved off the bed, but didn't

move very far away. The look in his eye was dark, yet inviting. Was he as turned on as she?

She turned to face him. "So, where do we go from here?"

He walked the two short steps to her, put his hand behind her neck and pulled her to him. After a moment where he seemed to gaze through her, he pressed his lips to hers.

Fireworks. Daphne almost fainted. Yay! He did like her! Whoo-hoo!

He held her tightly to him, his tongue exploring the depths of her mouth. She could feel him pressed against her, hard and ready. He smelled so good, he kissed so magnificently, she wondered how long it would be before she was naked in bed with him.

When he pulled away, his eyes were heavy-lidded with lust. "I want you," he said simply. Then he added, "But... I think we should straighten out our professional relationship first. I want to play with you, but since we met in such... unusual circumstances, I don't want to blur the boundaries here anymore than we already have. I don't usually tie women to my bed who haven't been invited here."

"I appreciate that. I don't usually meet my dates by breaking into their houses."

His eyes twinkled. A slight smile played across his sensual lips. "No, huh? Am I your first?"

"You're the first person ever to catch me. I must have given myself away during my termite inspection. You're good. Like I said, you're the first to catch me."

"And I really don't want to let you go, either. But... as opposed to what my ex-wife said, I'm a tediously moral man. While this game is fun, I want it to be on the up and up. I don't want you to feel taken advantage of."

"I don't. I got that about you. I can read people pretty well. And your ex-wife, I got the feeling she was kind of a bottom feeder. Apparently the woman has some expensive tastes and a new boytoy to keep in Gucci. We should all have such problems."

He seemed surprised by her appraisal. "Why did you take the case?"

"Because I don't have a rich husband. I actually have to earn my money. And she's paying me a bundle."

"How much?"

"A grand a day. I normally make two hundred and fifty per day. She wants your cash, bad, and I've got a pretty good rep in that department. I can find money, anywhere. However, you're the first moral man I've come across. After I did the investigation on you, I had some doubts about the case. Your business partners sure had some high praise for you. So I didn't feel great about this, but I have some serious dental work to be done in the coming months and honey, I needed the money."

He smirked. "So you obviously aren't bothered by the kind of morals I am."

"Apparently not."

"Hmmm. You intrigue me, Miss Goddard. I wonder if I can reform you."

She laughed. "Doubtful. But a lovely idea. However, if it makes you feel better, I'm dropping the case. I can find other work. I'd rather not feel guilty and unfortunately for me, you're too nice. And I don't mess over nice people. Even though you did just give me a serious hiding, I did break into your home. So, let's call it even, shall we? Unless you'd like to file charges?"

"I don't think that's necessary. I think you learned your lesson."

"I have."

He smiled. "Excuse me, but I just can't resist here," he said. He took her into his arms and kissed her. Daphne was transported. The man was so seductive and tantalizing, the experience seemed otherworldly.

Within seconds, they were both naked and all over each other on his expansive bed. He kept trying to slow things down and tease her, but she was having none of it. She finally leapt on top of him and rode him into a spectacular climax.

Afterwards, he began laughing. "I'm not used to my women taking control," he said.

She just smiled at him. "I'm not used to taking things so slow. You're too hot. I had to have you."

The look in his eye darkened, a sinister smile played on his lips. "You know, you really are a bad girl."

Daphne liked this game. "How bad?"

He flipped her onto her stomach, got her in a hold and began spanking her. But not hard. The man was a total turn-on. Daphne loved playing power games and she loved being spanked. Well, she hadn't enjoyed it earlier when he was really punishing her, but this felt good. The man knew how to administer a sensual spanking. Very talented.

Daphne began to get aroused again, very aroused. But she played like she was trying to get away from him, which made him increase the intensity of the spanking. Right when it got a bit edgy, he stopped.

He pulled her up, forced her onto her knees and entered her from behind. All Daphne could do was scream with delight. The man should be listed with the FBI, what he could do with his tool was unreal. Talk about a deadly weapon. She couldn't remember having a more exciting nor talented lover. The guy was completely tuned into her and



adjusted his lovemaking to bring the best out of her. She exploded with orgasm after orgasm.

Finally, when she thought she could stand no more, he came. Which propelled her into a spectacular climax. This guy was amazing!

She fell next to him; both were sweaty and out of breath. When they caught each other's gaze, they both began laughing.

"Wow, man, you are hot," she gushed, leaning over to kiss him.

He grabbed her and pulled her on top of him once more. He kissed her thoroughly, then rolled her off him and kissed her again.

When he pulled away, he grinned down at her. "Well, this evening certainly turned out much more pleasantly than I'd imagined. I thought I'd be protecting myself from a dangerous predator."

"Seems like the roles got reversed here, huh?" she giggled.

He laughed. "Apparently. So, you're really dropping the case, Miss Goddard?"

"After that? Hell yeah. Even if this is a one-night-stand, there's no way I'm gonna take her money. Like I said, I have other work. I actually had to cancel some to take this case."

"You called this a one-night-stand. Do you engage in this type of... activity often?"

"No."

"No?"

"Nope. I'm kind of a one-man-woman. Just between husbands now."

"Oh, so you've been married more than once?"

"Oh, yeah. Twice, actually."

"Twice? How old are you?" asked Stefan.

"That's a state secret."

"You can't be more than thirty-four."

"Oh, I could."

"Really?"

"Really. Okay, fine, I'm forty-two."

"Really?"

"Yes, and thank you for that surprised expression," she said with a grin.

"So you don't do this very often, then?"

"Never. Well, not since I was... twenty-something. You... this was special. And I couldn't resist. But... you probably got stuff to do, huh? I should probably go."

"I'd rather you didn't," he said.

"You want me to stay?"

"Uh-huh. I don't think I'm quite done with you."

She smiled. "Really?"

"Really."

The night continued on its wonderful trajectory. Daphne had never had more fun with a man in bed before. Stefan was attentive, generous and a master in the sexual arts. By the time she awoke in his arms, Daphne was concerned. She could tell she was falling for the guy. Talk about stupid. She knew she had to get out of there and do it fast.

Luckily, he was still asleep when she got up. She quickly got on her clothes and left him a note, thanking him for the evening and assuring him that she'd quit the case.

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Daphne drove straight to her office and called Mrs. Devane.

"Caroline Devane here," came the woman's voice on the phone.

"Hi, Mrs. Devane, this is Daphne Goddard."

"Oh, Miss Goddard, how are you? Did you find that rat's money yet?"

"Uh, no. And I'm afraid I'm going to have to drop the case. I'll refund you your deposit and—"

"He got to you, didn't he?" Caroline asked.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Stefan, he got to you. He offered you more money than I'm paying you, didn't he? Look, I'll pay you double."

"No, no. Look, I just couldn't find the office. I broke into his house and searched the entire thing and—"

"He seduced you, didn't he?"

Daphne started coughing. "Uh... excuse me?" she said, choking.

"I knew it! He seduced the last two detectives, damn it, I'm gonna have to hire a man, I knew it."

"He... what?"

"Oh, don't tell me you thought you were special. Oh, Christ, let me guess, he gave you his 'tediously moral man' speech, didn't he?"

"Uh..."

"Typical. He gets everyone with that speech. Probably made me out to look like some gold-digger. As if. Look, all I want is my inheritance back. That's why I hired you to find his secret bank accounts. He took all my inheritance from me and wouldn't give it up in the divorce. I was so stupid I co-mingled the money and then in the divorce settlement, he pretended not to remember. Since I had no proof that I'd given it to him—since he handled all the money—he conveniently forgot about it. I should have never signed that pre-nup. I can't believe I lost five million dollars of my own money. Oh, forget it. He's compromised you. I thought you were good. Apparently not good enough. No worries, I'll find someone else. Just let me leave you with this warning: he doesn't care about anyone or anything but that stupid empire of his. The only reason he seduced you was to get you off his case. But he doesn't care about anyone. Especially the women he beds. We're all a dime-a-dozen. He cheated on me on our honeymoon, for

God's sake. And no one believed me. He's good. He's very, very good."

"I'm... uh, sorry, Mrs. Devane."

"Don't worry about it. I'm disappointed because everyone said you were the best, but when I saw you, I thought he might try something with you. You're too cute. I'll hire someone uglier or a male next time. Good luck to you, and if you hear from him, don't listen to him. He's incapable of feeling anything for anyone other than himself. And he's anything but moral."

"Huh."

"And one more thing, if he angers you like I think he will? And you decide to find that money? I'll be open to doing business with you. Hell hath no fury, and I could use a good ally. Good luck, Miss Goddard."

"Uh, thanks. And... sorry. I..."

"It's not your fault. He's a master at deception."

"It is my fault. I should have known better."

"No one knows how evil he is, only his ex-wives and girlfriends. We know. Well, all except for that cow, Fiona Martin. She's an idiot. So ignore her, but talk to the others. Take care, Miss Goddard."

"Thanks, Mrs. Devane."

Daphne hung up and didn't know what to think. Except that she'd blown it. What had she been thinking? Sleeping with a man she was investigating? She fell for the oldest trick in the book. Damn it, anyway. She'd just thrown away how much money because she'd given into her hormones? One look from a pretty face and she just fell on her back? Such an unflattering mirror. Guess it had been too long in between husbands. Damn, damn, damn.

The more Daphne thought about it, the more enraged she became. Of course, on both sides it was all hearsay. Caroline could be lying to her. Of

course, what was more likely? The man who had money to lose or the woman who stood to gain? Tricky.

Daphne decided to do a bit more digging before she gave up on the case of Mr. Stefan Devane. She reviewed her notes and found a list of ex-girlfriends and one ex-wife. What could it hurt?

After speaking to two of the ex-girlfriends, it became clear that Stefan was a jerk. Both women were bitter. While she'd been unable to reach the ex-wife, that Fiona woman, the two ex-girlfriends had her convinced. Stefan was a user. Damn it.

As Daphne stared off into space, beating herself up for her stupidity, the phone rang. Absently, she picked it up.

"Daphne Goddard here," she said.

"You're in trouble," came a male voice.

"What? Who?" Then she got the voice. Stefan Devane. Daphne could feel her blood turn to ice.

"You snuck out of here this morning before I got a chance to wake you up properly."

"Oh, I'm sure. Look, I'm done with the games. I know who you are and I'm an idiot. So, if you could just do me a favor and forget about last night, I'll forget about last night and then I can resume my self-delusion that I'm actually good at my job. Good day, Mr. Devane—"

"Caroline got to you, didn't she?"

"Look, I'm tired of you two. Besides, she didn't just get to me, so did Tami Wagner and Jamie Fisher. Got quite a rep, Mr. Morals," she bit out snidely.

"Caroline is quite effective when she wants to be. Jamie believed her. Tami... well, she was quite a piece of work. Did Tami mention that she only used me to get a job at my corporation?"

"Don't care. Look, had a great time with you, let's just leave it at that, okay? I feel stupid enough

as it is. And depressed. For the record, you're good. I haven't been duped like this in years. And here I thought I was so smart."

"So did I. But if you believed my ex-wife you're not nearly as smart as I thought."

"Look, I have no idea why we're even having this conversation. Like you wanted me for more than one or two nights—*right*. Rich, handsome successful bazillionaires do not date private detectives. This was going nowhere, anyway. I have no morals, remember?"

"Yes, but I was very interested in reforming you, Miss Goddard. I think we have more in common than you think. And contrary to what you might have heard, I don't do one-night-stands. I'm only interested in pursuing women who have the potential to be my future wife. And I still think you have great potential in that area."

Daphne snorted in disgust. "Oh, please. Now I know you're lying. If you'll excuse me, I've got an appointment with my gynecologist to get tested for diseases and an appointment with my shrink to get my head checked for mental illness. I had quite a lapse yesterday. Good day," she bit out. She slammed down the phone. Jerk!

It was at that point that Daphne decided to end her investigation and chalk the whole experience up to stupidity. It was time to get back to making money. She called up all the clients she'd put off and quickly filled up her schedule.

She took a shower and washed the smell of Mr. Evil off of her, made herself some coffee and sat down at her desk to make some calls when the phone rang.

"Daphne Goddard here," she said dismally into the phone.

"Caroline Devane here. Just thought you'd want to know that Stefan just called me to gloat about his triumph last night."

"I so don't want to hear this."

"I'm sure, I just thought you might want to take the case again, seeing as how he... uh, how did he put it? Prostituted himself to protect his wealth? I think that's what he said."

Daphne could hear the blood rushing in her ears. "He did, huh?"

"I'm sorry, you still harbored some feelings for him, didn't you?" Caroline asked in a silky tone.

"No... Not after I talked to Tami and Jamie."

"Yeah, they tried to warn me. Anyway, I just thought you ought to know what he said and that he's going to the opera fundraiser tonight."

"The one at the Ritz?" Daphne asked.

"Yes. I have a ticket that I'm not using if you'd like to attend. While he said he'd prostituted himself, he did praise you as being... how did he put it? As kinky as he?"

"He did, did he?"

"Oh, yes. Stefan always did like his little perverted spanking games. If you're still interested in making some big money, I'll double my price to two grand and give you this ticket. I'll just bet you can snare him and get him to tell you where all that lovely money is."

A light appeared at the end of Daphne's tunnel. This might work well. Revenge and money, all in one shot. Sounded pretty good.

"Where are you?" Daphne asked.

"I'm at home. Would you like to stop by to pick up the ticket?"

"Why the hell not?"

"I'll be waiting."

Daphne hadn't looked this good in years. As she checked herself out in the opera house bathroom mirror, she almost couldn't believe it. Her long, clingy sparkling gold gown was gorgeous. Thankfully, she had a good friend who was a buyer for Nordstrom; Celia always had extra beautiful things hanging about. Daphne had been concerned that she couldn't compete with all the rich women at the fundraiser, but now? There was no doubt. Especially due to the looks she'd already received from many of the male guests. Ha.

She was sipping on champagne, talking to the mayor, when she spotted Stefan. When he saw her, he went slack-jawed. Excellent. He recovered quickly and sauntered over to her. Daphne pretended to be interested in the mayor's boring monologue. The man kept stumbling over his words as he directed the entire speech to her breasts. The only reason she was talking to him was because he'd cornered her. And he was the mayor. She hoped she'd get some good work out of him. But perhaps he only wanted to ogle her boobs.

"Jim, how are you?" Stefan asked.

"Stefan Devane, my favorite contributor, how are you, sir? Still raking in millions on that little computer venture I sent your way?" the mayor asked.

"Yes, Jim. And thanks so much. By the way, Jilly Frank was asking about you. She's right over there," Stefan said, pointing to a place across the room.

Jim Hawthorn disappeared in a cloud of testosterone. Jilly Frank was the resident movie star of the city. And she had much bigger breasts than Daphne.

Daphne watched Stefan carefully. She had to play this right, or she could blow it.



"Miss Goddard, and how are you enjoying this wonderful evening? I didn't take you for an opera fan."

"There are many things you don't know about me, Mr. Devane."

"Apparently. You're looking... rather beautiful this evening," he said, clearly impressed with her. "Quite a departure from your spy outfit. Although, I think I preferred the latter. While you're outrageously stunning in that outfit, it was much more fun taking off your other outfit."

She snorted. "Hmm. I'll bet."

"Are you still angry with me? Still certain I'm a rogue and a user?"

"I'm not sure, jury's still out. While I bought your ex-girlfriends' stories, now I'm not so sure."

"Oh, you have new information?"

"No, it's just that I don't trust the lot of them."

He smiled. "You shouldn't."

Daphne tried to ignore her response to the man. The memories of his amazing lovemaking kept clouding her mind. His hands, his smile, that smoldering look in his grey eyes; incredibly arousing man.

"You're thinking about our time together. So am I," he said with a knowing look in his eye.

She said nothing, just sent him a half-smile.

"I have an idea," Stefan said. "Why don't we leave here and continue our evening in a more private setting? Then you can judge for yourself whether my exes were right. I think you've been relying on your own judgment for a while and have done well with it. I think you ought to listen to yourself. Not the gossip of angry women."

"Hmmm. I suppose it wouldn't do any harm."

He smiled widely. "My carriage awaits, m' lady."

As soon as they got settled into the back of Stefan's limo, he kissed her. Daphne momentarily

forgot what she was doing and where she was. All she wanted was this amazing man.

When he pulled away, he sent her an indecipherable look. Without warning, he yanked her across his lap, pulled up her dress and began spanking her. And he wasn't playing around, either. This hurt!

"Ow! Stefan! What did I do?" she demanded.

He answered with a flurry of spansks. Since she was in a tight gown, she couldn't squirm away. Finally, he stopped and pulled her up to face him.

"What?" she asked, wiping a tear away.

He smiled, but it wasn't a friendly smile. "That was just a warning. In case you have any ideas about double-crossing me. You wouldn't want to see me angry."

"I don't! You didn't have to spank me to warn me."

"Just so we're clear."

"Oh, we're clear, all right."

Was he onto her? Had his ex-wife warned him? Well, Daphne didn't know, but she'd have to proceed much more cautiously. She had a feeling that the man was even more dangerous than she'd previously thought.

But she'd win. She always won.

## Caught

### Chapter Three

Stefan Devane looked over at his passenger. Ms. Daphne Goddard was playing him. He'd spanked her as warning just moments before. She seemed acquiescent, but it was too much of a coincidence that she showed up at the opera fundraiser. Especially when his ex-wife had bought a ticket and hadn't showed. The same ex-wife that had hired Daphne to find his secret stashes of money.

He smiled as he thought about the night before. When he'd found Daphne after she'd broken into his house, he'd tied her to his bed and spanked her bare bottom. Oh, that had given him such a charge! She was darling. And so spunky and cunning.

He stiffened when he thought about their subsequent lovemaking session. Apparently, Daphne had been as attracted to him as he had been to her. It had been wild sex. The best he'd had in recent memory.

He thought she'd learned to trust him, but she'd left before he'd woken up. When he called her, she'd sounded furious with him. Apparently, Caroline had gotten to her. Along with several other of his ex-girlfriends. Unfortunately, Daphne had only talked to the gold-diggers. The users. He wished she'd talked to his ex-wife. Fiona was a gem. It hadn't worked out for them—they were just too different—but they'd always remained friends. But of course, Caroline wouldn't have wanted Daphne to talk to Fiona. So she'd given Daphne the names of all the other vipers that had tried to rob him.

Stefan had known something was up when Daphne showed up at the opera fundraiser and had begun flirting with him, mere hours after she'd accused him of using her and hung up on him. This

turnaround of hers had happened too quickly. He'd keep an eye on her and play along. If she were trying to put something over on him, he'd find out soon enough. Besides, this may all work to his favor. His little detective could play right into his hands.

And aside from any opportunities for revenge she may provide him, he relished the thought of spending time with her. Even if she was doing it for Caroline, it would still provide him with the opportunity to charm her. Because this was one woman he didn't want to let go. Daphne compelled him. And in ways no woman had compelled him in years. She was bright, adorable, talented and focused. Everything she did intrigued him. The way she'd gained entry to his home using her termite inspector disguise, the way she'd easily broken into his mansion a few days later, her personality and spunk—he'd enjoyed all of it. Plus, the girl loved power games. She was a match made in Heaven for him. Now all he had to do was to convince her of the fact.

What really excited him about Daphne was that there would always be a part of her that he couldn't tame. He'd have to stay on top of her even after he married her. And that thought made him hard. She'd always be trying to get away with something, and he'd have to stay one step ahead of her. Then, when he surely caught her, oh, what fun it would be to mete out her punishment.

He grinned. The thought of that hot body of hers tied to his bed, those luscious reddened cheeks, the way she wiggled and squirmed as he spanked her—all so very arousing.

For the present, he hoped his plan worked. He hoped she didn't get the advantage over him. If she did manage to hurt him financially—while he more than likely would still want to marry her—she'd

have to be punished severely for the infraction. He'd only punished a woman severely once. And that was Caroline.

From the moment he'd said, "I do," Caroline had been after his money. When he'd refused Caroline access to his financial information, she'd slept with his godson, David, who was barely twenty-one. Stefan had never felt more betrayed. Caroline seduced the poor kid and made sure that Stefan walked in on them. He'd never forget the look on the poor boy's face. Complete mortification. And that nasty little grin on Caroline's face—the witch.

Caroline would never forget the incident—Stefan made sure of that. He'd tied her up and taken his belt to her bare behind, striping it with nasty purple welts. Oh, how she'd begged him to spare her. And what great pleasure her remorse had given him. She hadn't been able to sit down for two and a half solid weeks.

It was on that day that Caroline made her promise—she'd ruin him at all costs. She wouldn't give up until he was penniless and alone.

Daphne wasn't capable of that kind of treachery. While a bit mercenary, down deep she was a good person. She was, however, capable of annoying him. And if she didn't play her cards just right, she might find herself the recipient of the worst spanking of her life. While it would be nothing like what he inflicted on Caroline, Daphne would learn an important lesson about his boundaries. And if she were to become his wife, it was important she learn all about his limits.

He looked over at her, riding next to him in his Mercedes and got instantly stiff. She was so hot. Her long legs beckoned to him, that place between her milky white thighs enticed him. The thought of her taut, rounded bottom—the pink, reddened color, just after he'd spanked it soundly—God, he wanted

her. And he wanted her for keeps. No matter what games she played, he'd outplay her.

"Are you all right?" Daphne asked, breaking Stefan out of his processing.

"Why, yes," he replied smoothly.

"You've been quiet for a while."

"Just thinking about our last... encounter," he said, winking at her. She smiled nervously and looked away.

"Um, me, too. Are we going back to your place?"

"I thought we would... after maybe a nightcap and a snack at The Getty?"

"Wow, that's expensive. Oh, right, I keep forgetting how rich you are. I've never been there."

"Well, you're dressed perfectly, and it's one of my favorite places to eat."

"Cool," she said. A fleeting expression crossed her face. Troubled, she was troubled. There was his proof, she was playing him. And she didn't feel good about it. Perfect. He knew just how to play this little girl. She wouldn't even know what hit her. Well, she would because it would be his firm hand spanking her toned, rounded behind. Well, that was after. For now? The game was on.

Stefan was acting weird. The looks he kept sending her were making her nervous. Was he onto her? She'd have to watch herself. The man was smart. Not to mention drop dead gorgeous. All she really wanted to do was throw him to the ground and have her way with him. Which was annoying. She knew he was just using her. He was a rogue and a liar. She had to get her head clear.

They had cocktails at The Getty—a fantastic place, all chrome and glass and black leather sophistication. Daphne kept forgetting her plan and getting lost in Stefan's dark smoldering gaze. His hands were beautiful; she kept remembering what

they could do to her in bed. Which made her squirm. My God, she wanted this man!

Which was terrible. He'd taken five million of Caroline's inheritance from her. At least, this is what Caroline claimed. Was he really the callous beast those women had described? Or was he a victim of gold-diggers?

Just then, she heard Caroline's voice in her head. *Just thought you'd want to know that Stefan just called me to gloat about his triumph over you last night. I thought you might want to take the case again, seeing as how he... uh, how did he put it? Prostituted himself to protect his wealth?*

"How do you like your cocktail?" Stefan asked.

Daphne broke out of her reverie and had to stop herself from punching the man.

"Daphne, are you all right?"

*Get it together!* "Uh... yes. Sorry, Stefan, I'm a bit tired from last night. You kept me up quite late," she said as coyly as she could manage.

He grinned. He believed her, good. She was going to get this guy. Forget his nice act, the man was a snake. *Prostituted himself*. He was going down.

"Would you like another drink or would you..." Stefan asked, sending her a dark, sensual look.

She smiled. "Why not? I'm ready for *dessert*."

He laughed and paid the check.

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A half an hour later, they were at his place, making out on his expansive bed. As Daphne kissed the man and allowed his talented hands to roam over her body, the voices in her head kept screaming at her. *This is no way to exact revenge on someone! You're falling in love with this man! Get out now!*

At least, this is what she wanted to do. But she couldn't make herself; Stefan was intoxicating, his lovemaking, superb. How could she leave when all she wanted to do was stay?

Soon, Daphne couldn't keep her thoughts straight. She couldn't remember why she needed to hold back from the man. She got lost in him. Stefan guided her through three hours of amazing, fantastical sex. He brought more out of her than any other lover she'd had before. She fell asleep in his arms, satisfied and glowing.

Two o'clock in the morning, Daphne awoke with a start from a nightmare. She'd dreamed that Stefan had taken her business and her house from her and that she was alone on the streets, penniless. While she begged for spare change on a street corner, Caroline walked by and laughed at her. "Told you so," the tall blonde taunted.

Daphne mentally slapped herself. Why had she slept with the man? Why did she take this stupid case? Why had she gone against her own rules and slept with the enemy? She was disgusted with herself.

The only thing that would redeem her would be to find that office of his, get onto his computer and find Caroline's money. Then she could put this whole unpleasant business behind her.

There was only one place she hadn't yet searched: the attic. When she'd performed her "termite inspection" the housekeeper had prohibited her from going up the staircase to the attic. The older woman said that the attic was full of asbestos and until the environmental clean-up crew came to remove the toxic substance, no one was allowed to enter the space. Such a perfect cover for a secret room.

Daphne got up, careful not to disturb Stefan. She sneaked out of the room and headed down the



hallway. The door to the attic was locked. Daphne took out her little lock-picking tool set and opened the lock without much difficulty. She got inside and climbed the narrow staircase that led up to the attic. The hardwood staircase was very clean and looked like it was used often. Daphne began to get excited.

She reached the top of the stairs and found another door. She opened it and was instantly thrilled. She'd found it! Stefan's hidden office! The room was huge. A large bank of plasma screens lined one entire wall; each with a different view of the house. She saw Stefan sleeping soundly in his bedroom. So this was how he caught her!

She marveled at the high-tech command center; the man clearly dumped a fortune into the room. When she saw his computer on a large desk in the corner, she knew she'd hit pay dirt.

The man clearly never expected anyone to find the room, his computer wasn't password protected. She easily got into his files and copied all of them onto a thumb drive she'd brought with her. She had him now!

She made it back to his room and got into bed without him even knowing she'd left. Ha! She was going to win this game!

Stefan woke her up by making love to her. Her groggy mind was thrilled, she had a spectacular orgasm, but then—when she began to come down from the excitement—fear, guilt and anger overtook her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Oh, fine. I just remembered that I had an appointment this morning, and I can't be late. Accountant," she explained, hoping he'd buy the story.

"Will I see you later?"

*NO!* "If you wish."

"I wish," he said enthusiastically and made love to her once more.

She drove home, later, completely conflicted and feeling terrible about herself. She had to get her head straight. He was the enemy.

She reviewed his files and found out that the man was richer than anyone suspected. He had many secret bank accounts; most of them were in Switzerland. She'd also found something even more interesting: a complete dossier on Daphne Goddard. It was scary how much information he'd managed to gather on her in such a short period of time. The man must have amazing connections. Even better than hers.

She was just closing her file when she came across a notation he'd made at the bottom of her biography. *Interesting, kinky, playmate. No morals, however. Fun, but no future...*

He'd trailed off there at the end, but it was clear what he meant. While true, it made her blood boil. So he had been lying to her about their future! He was just using her! He was a liar!

Now inflamed, Daphne called Caroline and forwarded all the files to her. Within the hour, Fed Ex delivered a huge check from Mrs. Devane. She'd won!

So why did she feel like she lost? She felt horrible. She didn't feel good at all. Oh, well, it was all over. Time to forget about Mr. Stefan Devane, Caroline Devane, all of it.

What she needed was to get away for a while. Take the money and go to the beach. There was a little motel she loved in Santa Cruz with a lovely view of the ocean and the pier. She'd go there and relax. Go to the wharf and have a few drinks and some calamari. That would make her feel better.

She packed and took off. As soon as she hit Highway 280, her phone rang. She looked at the number: she didn't recognize it.

"Hello? Daphne Goddard here."

"Miss Goddard? You called me regarding Stefan Devane? My name is Fiona Martin and—"

Stefan's first wife. "Oh, Miss Martin, never mind. I got all the information I could ever want about that jerk. I heard it all from Caroline and Jamie—"

"You didn't actually believe that garbage about Stefan, did you?"

"Well, no. I mean, yeah, of course, I did. He's a user and a... what do you mean?"

"Well, if you're talking about Stefan Devane of Devane Enterprises, then you're wrong. Caroline broke his heart. And all Jamie wanted was that job. Stefan has had the worst luck with women. Ever since we split up, he's gotten taken advantage of, time and time again. The man always leads with his heart. I told him he was too rich to be so trusting."

"Wait. Are you his ex-wife?"

"Yes, his first wife."

"Why are you...?"

"Why am I speaking about him so highly? Because he deserves it. He is a wonderful, honest, hard-working man. And Stefan has been so abused by women since we split up, it's a wonder he hasn't turned to men. Poor man."

"Poor man? This is Stefan Devane who lives on Morning Glory Road?"

"Yes. Why? Do you know another?"

"No, I'm just confused."

"You're a private detective, am I correct?"

"Yes."

"And you believed those horrible women? Didn't you do your homework? Interview his business associates?" Fiona demanded.

"Well, yeah, but they wouldn't have a problem with him. They don't love him."

"Well, neither did Caroline and all those other con artists. Caroline was the worst. You know when Stefan wouldn't give her access to all his bank accounts, she slept with his godson? And made sure he caught the two in bed?"

"What?" Daphne demanded.

"Yeah. You didn't hear that one? That's when Stefan dumped her. Right after he took his belt to her. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that little scene. Boy, did she deserve that. That's when Caroline vowed to ruin him. The witch."

Daphne almost drove off the road. She finally pulled over because she was about to faint.

"Please tell me this is not true. Please tell me you are lying," Daphne practically begged.

"I'm not. Why? You didn't help Caroline, did you?"

"I'm going to be sick."

"Oh, no."

"Look, I have to go and commit suicide. Yes, I helped Caroline. And I might just have ruined Stefan in the process. I'm going to be sick."

"You'd better get off the phone and warn him, then. It's the least you can do. Stefan is a great man and deserves the best."

"I'm going to be sick."

"I wish you would have found me sooner," Fiona said.

"You have no idea how much I wish I had, too."

Daphne hung up and sat there, staring into space. She had to call Stefan. She had to make things right.

"Stefan?"

"Daphne? I didn't think I'd hear from you until later. What's going on, gorgeous?"

In a rush, Daphne blurted, "I don't know how to say it, so I'm just going to say it. I stabbed you in the back. I got onto your files last night in your secret office, copied them all and sent them to Caroline. I ruined your life, and now I'm going to go throw myself off a cliff. Freeze all your accounts now."

"What? Calm down, I can barely understand you."

"I'm horrible! I believed Caroline. Your ex-wife, Fiona, just set me straight. I can't even apologize because sorry doesn't cut it. Don't worry, you won't ever see me again."

"Where are you?" he demanded.

"I'm out of the city. I'm going away for a while. I can't stand myself. I'm sorry, Stefan. You didn't deserve me. I'll say good-bye now. Freeze all your accounts. Caroline has the contents of your computer from your secret office. I got in there last night and copied everything and ruined your life. Go ahead and report me to the police."

"Daphne, stop!" he ordered.

But she couldn't. "When I get back, I'll go to jail. And I won't fight you. I'm sorry. I'm a horrible, rotten, stupid person. Good-bye."

Fighting back the tears, she hung up. Now completely miserable, Daphne pulled back onto the road and headed to Santa Cruz.

She checked in wearing sunglasses to hide her puffy eyes. After throwing her small overnight bag onto the bed, she decided to take a walk along the beach. And perhaps hurl herself into the surf.

She walked and kicked pieces of sea debris out of her way; seaweed, driftwood. The beach wasn't very crowded, which wasn't a surprise, it being winter and all. She walked down as far as she could go and then turned back.

She noticed a man was walking towards her. She ignored him as she had everyone else on the beach. Suddenly, he was in front of her and blocking her way. Great. Now she was going to get attacked. What a perfect day.

She looked up, and her heart stopped. Stefan. Looking fairly furious.

"Stefan!" she exclaimed.

"You're coming with me," he said and reached out and grabbed her arm. She didn't fight him. She didn't care anymore. He was probably having her arrested.

As they neared her motel, she looked for signs of police; she found none.

Stefan led her to her room. "Open it."

"But—"

"Open it," he ordered in a louder voice.

She did as she was told. He pushed her inside and shut the door behind him. He closed the curtains and turned to her with a stern look on his face.

She looked down. He was just about to verbally dismantle her. And she deserved it.

Stefan walked towards her, grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her towards him. She looked up into his eyes; she'd never seen anyone angrier.

The next thing she knew, he was sitting and she was across his lap. Why hadn't she seen this coming? Was she stupid?

He put her arm behind her back and pulled her jeans and panties down to her ankles.

"Stefan, no! Just call the police! Arrest me, don't spank me!"

"Too late, little brat!"

The force with which he swatted her, stunned her. The pain took her breath away. She thought he'd spanked her hard that first time, but it was nothing compared to this.

"Stefan! No!"

"Don't tell me 'no!'" he thundered, laying into her behind with all he had.

Her butt felt like it was on fire. She was sure actual flames must be shooting off of it. She'd never felt the likes of his punishing hand before in her life. This man meant business! He spanked her bare behind, one cheek then the other in a ceaseless assault. One spank led into the next—powerful and terrible. So rapid were his strikes that she could barely tell when one ended and another began.

She tried to get away, and all that did was make him spank her harder. He powered into her sit spots until she thought she'd lose her mind. He spanked the sides of her rear end from the top all the way down to her thighs. He left no spot untouched. She wondered if she'd ever be able to sit again.

Tears began to puddle beneath her face; she howled and cried, but Stefan just went on and on. She finally could fight no more and just collapsed in a pool of misery across his lap and let him do his worst to her.

Soon after she'd surrendered to her punishment, he stopped. He yanked her up forcefully and faced her.

"Look at me!" he commanded.

She tried, but couldn't.

"Look at me," he demanded again.

She finally did.

"How could you ever think that I would use you? Couldn't you tell how much I cared about you?"

"No," she cried miserably.

"You rotten little wench," he said, crushing her in a hug. "I love you, you idiot! I'd never hurt you, and I can barely believe that you wanted to hurt me. After what we shared?"

"Stefan, I'm sorry I believed them, but they were so convincing. And I read that note about me.

You wrote that I was fun, but you had no future with me."

He pulled away and sent her a disapproving stare. "You misunderstood the note because I hadn't finished writing it. A call came in, and I got interrupted. I was going to write: 'Fun, but no future wife of mine is going to be a private detective. Going to force her to quit and marry me.'"

Daphne stared at him in shock. Then she burst into tears. "I made you hate me! I ruined everything! Now my life is over! Over!"

She tried to push him away, but he hung on. "Daphne, shut up, for God's sake, and stop crying!"

"You hate me!"

"No, I don't!"

"I ruined your life!"

"No, you didn't. Listen to me. Calm down and listen to me. That computer was a set-up. The files were fakes."

This stopped her. "They were *what*?"

He nodded. "Yes. I knew what you were up to. I wanted you to copy them. When Caroline goes to try to steal that money, her actions will be traced, and she'll be put into jail for attempted robbery. I'm sorry darling, but I had to use you to get back at her. Besides, you deserved what you got for not listening to me in the first place."

Her mind could not catch up. "What?"

"Darling, it's true. You didn't hurt anything. But don't ever pull something like that on me again, or you know what you'll get, don't you? I'm still not pleased with you. But I'm a very forgiving man," he brought her to him and kissed her. When he pulled away, he asked, "Do you think we can put all this behind us now and just concentrate on our future?"

"Our... what?"

"Our future. I figure a spring wedding, followed by a honeymoon in Bora Bora. Then you'll quit that



horrid job and help me stop people like you from breaking into my company. How's that? You want to come to work for me as my chief of security?"

"Wait. Did you just propose?"

"Yes, I did. You never answered."

"Oh, Stefan, yes, yes!" she said, throwing her arms around him.

Laughing, he kissed her.

## A Fast Ticket to a Spanking

### Chapter One

Teresa Harris walked out from her office building and up to her car parked directly out front. She found if she arrived before seven in the morning, she always got a good parking spot. Arriving early also meant she could leave early. She was the first one in the office and the first to leave, and she never had to deal with the traffic. She loved flex-time.

She was about to climb inside her old Toyota when she noticed a piece of paper stuck underneath the windshield wiper. Not another ticket! That was the only problem with parking out front; sometimes she forgot to feed the meter properly. She could park for free in the parking garage, but it was too far to walk, considering her footwear of choice: anything cute with five-inch heels. Her shoes made her legs look great, but also made walking difficult.

But darn it, this was her fifth ticket this month, and it was only the tenth of the month. Normally, she tossed the citations into the garbage, but recently a friend of hers had suggested a different route: putting the ticket on someone else's windshield. That way, you had the chance the person would pay it without really examining it closely. *Heh-heh-heh.*

With an evil grin, Teresa removed the ticket, walked to the car parked behind hers and slipped it beneath the windshield wiper. The car was an expensive car; she figured the owner could afford it.

Every day that week, Teresa somehow forgot to put enough change in the meter. And every day she withdrew the ticket and put it on the car behind her. On Friday, she finally noticed that she was putting the ticket on the same car, a late model black Porsche. Once she made the discovery, she couldn't

help but burst out laughing. Normally, she was a pretty moral person, but somehow the situation struck her as funny. Some rich person certainly was having a string of bad luck.

As Teresa drove away, she thought about this rich person with the Porsche she'd inadvertently targeted. It was obviously some corporate executive with a huge expense account and money to burn. Must be nice. She barely made enough money to keep herself in nice shoes. She had a teeny apartment, a ten-year-old Toyota and hardly any savings. She liked her job at the venture capital business, but she hated working for rich people. She saw the payroll once by accident and was chagrined to find out her bosses made thirty times more than she did. Thirty times! When she barely made more than the interns. She had a BA degree, but it was in sociology, and hadn't really helped with her salary. She did client profiles and research; one of the more lowly jobs in the office. After she saw those spreadsheets, she almost quit, but Fillmore and Bruce paid more than the university job she'd had before.

She'd loved her job at the university. Problem was, it was super expensive living in San Francisco. After her divorce, she found she wasn't making ends meet and finally had to quit and find a higher paying job. She'd found her current position in the Financial District. It paid half again as much as she'd made at San Francisco State. But even with her pay raise, she was barely making it. Until she could figure out something else, she was stuck.

Which was why she didn't feel bad about the parking ticket thing. That Porsche owner could afford those dumb tickets, but she sure as hell couldn't. Served the jerk right for making so much. Some fancy guy working in a fancy office making

millions while she struggled to pay her rent. Life wasn't fair.

And Teresa had to admit; it was fun getting away with something naughty. Especially considering she was bothering some rich idiot. Too funny!

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Chas Wilson couldn't believe it. Another parking ticket! He was late as usual, so he grabbed the thing off his windshield and threw it into his briefcase. This was ridiculous; he was sure he'd put enough money in the meter. But he had no time to worry about it now. He had a tennis date and couldn't be late or he and his partner would lose their court time. He'd been late the last time due to a client that wouldn't shut up. This time, he'd been on the phone with a banking officer, trying to straighten out a financing snafu upon which rode a billion dollar deal. He glanced at his watch; he might just make it.

He drove as fast as he could, turned a corner, and the traffic stopped. He could see smoke rising from the intersection ahead, about seven cars up. He tried to back up, but it was too late; he was blocked by a large truck. Damn it! After ten minutes of not moving, he finally had to give up. He called Harold and told him the bad news. Harold harangued him in a good-natured way and then told him he was lucky, another guy at the club was looking for a quick game, so at least Harold would be able to play.

Chas hung up, swore to himself and punched the steering wheel. He'd really needed that game. This week had been so hectic. So many deals were teetering on the edge that he'd barely slept. He was so spent, so tired and feeling so crazy, only a good workout would settle him. He decided after he got

out of traffic, he'd go to the club to work out in the weight room and hope for an opening on the court. Tennis was the main way he blew off steam. Well, that and sex, but since Belinda had left him six months before, he hadn't been able to connect with anyone interesting. Not that he hadn't had any opportunities.

Word had got out on the floor of his building that he was single, and he'd been propositioned by a hoard of single females, but none he cared about. The women were either too needy, too over-dressed, too self-centered or not fashionable enough.

He had to admit it; he liked a woman who dressed well. Someone who knew how to put together a nice outfit that suited her but didn't call inordinate attention to herself.

Chas had loved Belinda. He'd even asked her to marry him. Of course, directly after his proposal, she'd informed him that there was no way she'd ever live with him or cook for him or do anything for him. If he agreed to live in adjoining apartments, she'd consider his proposal. While he didn't expect his wife to serve him, he didn't want absolutes. Belinda was so afraid of getting locked in a traditional role that she went completely overboard and wouldn't even bring him a drink if she was in the kitchen. He finally realized that it would never work between them, and they broke up. He'd been so disappointed, he hadn't dated since.

Chas looked around the intersection at all the people who'd gotten out of their cars. Most were furious; some were resigned, and many were curious about why they were stuck. As for him, he needed to make the most of every minute. He thought of that damn ticket waiting to be paid. Might as well.

Sighing, Chas opened his briefcase and took out the ticket. Damn this. This was the fifth ticket he'd paid for this week. Had he really been that distracted lately? He wrote out the amount and addressed the check to the proper city bureau.

Tearing the receipt from the ticket, a number on the citation caught his attention. It was a number written in the box where his license plate number was supposed to be. But it wasn't his license number. It was someone else's.

No. He couldn't have been so stupid as to pay someone else's parking ticket. He couldn't have. He re-read the ticket. He couldn't believe it. The ticket *was* someone else's. It was for a ten-year-old Toyota with vanity plates that read "IM TRBLE." Trouble, indeed! This person was a total jerk. Damn it! All those tickets! He'd been so distracted that he hadn't even checked the meter! It probably hadn't even expired, and he hadn't noticed. Nor had he read the tickets; he'd just paid them! What an idiot! Damn this!

Chas punched the steering wheel again in total frustration and anger. How dare someone do this to him! Some malicious creep with a ten-year-old Toyota who was proud they caused trouble for others. Well, two could play at that game. He'd make some trouble for them, all right. He'd find the culprit and bring them to justice. They had to work in his building. Since they'd supplied him with their license number and make and model of car, it shouldn't be too hard to find them. And when he did, oh, how he would make them pay. Maybe even with their job.

He put the offending ticket away in his briefcase and tore up the check. Taking a sip of water, he re-examined the traffic jam ahead of him. Now everyone except he was out of their cars. Some were chatting, some were on cell phones, and some

just stared up ahead at the accident like they were watching a TV show.

About twenty-five feet away from him stood a girl talking on a cell phone. She wore a pink and black dress that fit her lithe and lean body quite well and showed off her sweet curves. She turned away from him, and he drew in a sharp breath of air. Her rear end was quite simply the nicest he'd ever seen. High, rounded and shapely, he could almost feel it in his hands. She turned back towards him. While she wore sunglasses, he could still make out the contours of her face. Her face matched the beauty of her body and behind. A cute, pert, turned up nose, long brown hair streaked with blonde, a full mouth, and high cheekbones. Adorable. Late twenties, early thirties; he instantly wanted her.

Perhaps this little traffic accident might have some benefits, after all. Chas got out of his car and locked the door behind him. He tried to appear as if he were interested in the accident ahead. Tow trucks were just hauling away the damaged cars, and it would only be a matter of minutes before the traffic cleared; he had to make his move.

He quickly worked his way towards the girl, who seemed engrossed in the conversation on her phone. When he walked around a Humvee, he saw that she was standing next to a car with its door ajar, obviously her car. It was a bright red Toyota Celica, an older sport coupe with a personalized license plate.

When he read the license plate, he stopped and stared. It couldn't be true. But plain as day, there it was. "IM TRBLE." This adorable little girl was the heinous criminal who'd put the tickets on his car! He couldn't believe it.

A surge of fury rushed through him. All he could think about was tossing her across his knee and spanking her into the middle of the next year. How

dare she! Not only had she destroyed the sweet image he had of her, she'd tricked him. Outsmarted him. Made a giant fool out of him. And Chas Wilson was nobody's fool.

He turned right back around, went to his car, grabbed the ticket out of his briefcase and headed off to confront her; so mad he could barely see straight.

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"Yeah, so since I'm obviously not gonna make it because of this dumb traffic jam, why don't you eat without me, and I'll catch something on the way home. Let's just do this tomorrow, okay?" Teresa told her friend, Babs.

Babs agreed, and they said their good-byes.

Teresa turned off the phone. Out of the corner of her eye, a movement caught her attention. She looked up and saw a man striding towards her very purposefully. He was staring right at her. She looked behind her, and no one stood directly there. She turned back around, and it was clear the man was headed right for her. He looked furious.

She didn't recognize him. He wore an expensive suit, expensive sunglasses and reeked of money. He was tall, had sandy brown hair and seemed very fit. A pretty good-looking guy, actually, but his expression looked as if he was about to explode.

About twenty feet away, he yelled, "You!" and pointed at her. He waved a piece of paper in his hand. "This is yours, Miss I'm Trouble!"

Holy Christ. This could not be the man. She looked behind him and nearly threw up. It was the black Porsche! This guy was the owner!

Teresa dove inside her car, slammed the door and locked it behind her just as he reached her.

"You open this window!" he thundered down at her.



She'd never been more scared in all her life. The man looked unbalanced, he was so mad.

She looked away and pretended to be somewhere else. She checked up ahead, and the traffic was clearing! Thank the Lord!

He pounded on her window and waved the ticket in his hand. "This is yours, you horrible little wench! I've paid at least twenty of these! These were all yours! How dare you put them on my car! You open this and you talk to me!"

The people outside their cars and on the sidewalks stared at the two. Teresa didn't know what to do; the traffic hadn't started moving yet.

"You look at me when I'm talking to you, young lady! At least have the decency to look at me!"

She finally looked up at him and a shiver of fear raced through her body. She hadn't seen anyone so mad at her since her father that time she'd stayed out late with Buddy Coombs.

Teresa had to do something. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

His face flushed red, and he took a step back away from her car; he looked nearly insane with anger. "How dare you! You know damn well what I'm talking about! This is your parking ticket! It has *your* license on it, and you put it under *my* windshield wiper! And you've done it for months, now! You owe me money!"

"Hey, the traffic's moving!" came a shout from near her. She looked ahead and the traffic was starting to move.

The man pointed at her vehemently. "Don't you dare go anywhere! You pull over, and you pay me, or by God, I'll track you down and make you pay! You work in my building! I *will* find you! Don't make me any angrier than I am right now!"

The car ahead of her moved. Relieved, Teresa started her car and followed. But, unfortunately,

traffic wasn't moving fast and the man stayed with her.

"You roll down this window!" he ordered, keeping pace with her.

The car ahead of her took off. Teresa knew Mr. Porsche couldn't follow. She rolled down the window an inch.

"Thanks for paying my tickets for me!" she shouted at the man. And then she surged ahead, leaving him behind.

His roar of anger nearly deafened her. She'd never heard such a sound before. Of course, she didn't blame him for being mad. She'd done something really rotten to him. Still, it was kind of funny. She began laughing. He'd looked so ridiculous, standing there shaking with rage.

As her laughter faded, she began to feel guilty, which upset her. After all, it was his fault he was so mad. He was taking the incident way too seriously. It was obvious the guy could afford the tickets. It was only a couple of hundred bucks, almost like a pack of gum to him. What a pansy. Getting all upset over a few measly parking tickets.

She quickly decided the man deserved it. He was obviously someone who lost his temper frequently. He probably badgered all his employees and his wife. Teresa had come along and provided him with some karma. She certainly didn't deserve the tickets. But he sure did.

She thought of his warning. He worked in her building. And he was determined to find her. Hmm. The guy could be a lawyer or something. God, that's all she needed; a lawyer after her. Perhaps it was time to take public transportation. She'd been considering it lately. Wearing tennis shoes to walk to work, then changing to her cute shoes. It would be cheaper. Her apartment was right on the subway line and so was her office

building. It would take a bit more time, but for the present, it would definitely save her rear end.

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For the next month, Chas looked everywhere for Miss I'm Trouble. He'd thought about reporting her to the police, but truthfully, he was looking forward to handling her himself. She needed a lesson, and he was just the one to teach it to her. He fantasized day in and day out about that rounded little rear over his knee, her squalls of pain as he spanked the fire out of her. He'd never met a more deserving brat in his life, or a more comely one.

Which brought up his main problem: he was still voraciously attracted to the hellion. And he couldn't figure out why. He'd only seen her that one time, yet all he could think about was making love to her. Well, after he spanked her, that was. What was wrong with him? He'd never been attracted to a rotten person like that before. What was it about her?

Oh, unfortunately, probably her body. She was the cutest thing he'd seen in years: impudent, defiant and ill mannered, yet adorable. Damn her, anyway.

---

Teresa was looking up some information on a prospective client when Beatrice, her supervisor, came into the room holding a packet of documents. Beatrice was one of the main reasons she stayed at the job; she'd taken Teresa under her wing from the first day and had always supported her.

Beatrice showed Teresa a large file folder. "Teresa, I'm so sorry to bother you, but could you possibly take this up to the sixth floor to Wilson and Associates? We did a profile for them. Francis just

finished it, and Ashley is out at the dentist. I have a meeting or I'd go."

"Beatrice, no problem. Give me a chance to stretch my legs."

The sixty-something woman handed her the packet. "Oh, thank God. Oh, also..." She looked around behind her, then came in and shut the door. She had a conspiratorial look on her handsome face. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "I'm not supposed to tell you, but I can't stand it. You're getting a promotion and a huge pay raise. That last profile you did paid off, and it was all because of your meticulous work. You're so good at this job, Teresa! You've really come a long way, and the bosses noticed. You never complain; you're here early, and you do great work. So congratulations, and please, act surprised when the boss tells you."

Teresa couldn't believe it. A pay raise! A different job! Whoo-hoo! "How exciting, thanks for telling me! I won't spill a thing."

Beatrice smiled warmly and left. Teresa was so excited that she got up and did a little dance. Then she grabbed the packet and headed off for the sixth floor with a spring in her step.

She rode the elevator up, found the office and walked in. A lovely woman in her late fifties sat behind the reception desk. Her nameplate read: Deborah Brown. She smiled when she saw Teresa.

"Are you from Fillmore and Bruce?" Deborah asked.

"I sure am. I think this is yours," Teresa said. She walked up and handed the packet to the woman.

"Thanks, he's been asking for this all day, and I forgot to call until a minute ago. We're so swamped. This week has been crazy! So, thanks for coming up so fast with this."

"No problem. And I hear you. Work can be really crazy sometimes."

Deborah nodded. "Especially around here this week."

A young man came bursting into the office behind Teresa. "I got them! I got them!"

Teresa turned around, amused. The secretary asked, "What, Earl? What did you get?"

"My personalized plates! Look, they say STUD876, that's my prefix number. Boy, are my friends gonna be jealous! I have to go show Stewie," the boy gushed, rushing from the room.

Deborah shook her head and laughed. "Intern, his first car, he's been talking about those plates forever. I can't see why anyone would bother."

Teresa laughed. "Because you're young and it's your first car. What he doesn't realize is that he'll outgrow them in a few months, and he's going to be stuck with them for a lot longer. He'll be so embarrassed. I know I am."

The secretary smiled. "Really? You have some?"

"Yes, and they're totally embarrassing, but I've been too busy to get them changed."

"What do they say?"

Right as a door opened behind Deborah, Teresa said, "My license plate reads 'I'm trouble.'"

As soon as the words left her mouth, she found herself staring at Mr. Black Porsche, who had just stepped out of the office behind Deborah. He was even more handsome than she remembered. About six-two, he had sandy brown hair and the most intense blue eyes she'd ever seen. A beautiful man.

His blue gaze went blank, and then the fire within him ignited. She swore she saw flames shooting out of his eyes. "You!" he roared, scaring the hell out of his secretary.

Teresa froze and stared at him in abject terror. Then she came to her senses. "Well, gotta go," she said, then turned and raced for the door.

"You wait!" he thundered.

She was out into the hallway and almost at the elevators when she felt his hand on her shoulder. She screamed out of pure terror, which startled him. When she turned to face him, he seemed completely taken aback.

"What is wrong with you? Are you trying to get me arrested? I only want to talk to you—well, I want to do more than talk to you. I'd really like to ring your neck. Now you *will* stop all this screeching and come with me," he said, reaching for her.

Teresa jumped back out of the way. "I'm late. I have a meeting."

"Cancel it—you just came from Fillmore and Bruce, didn't you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"No... I deliver the... coffee."

His features hardened. "I wouldn't dig my grave any deeper, if I were you."

"I don't work at Fillmore and Bruce!"

He laughed, but didn't seem amused. "Really? Well, let's go down and talk to them, shall we? I'm sure Ryan would love to hear about—"

"No!" she yelled.

"Will you keep your voice down?"

"You can't do this to me!"

"I haven't done anything to you, yet," he said.

"I have to go."

"Only straight to my office," he said, grabbing her arm.

He half-led, half-dragged her to his office, taking her past Deborah, who had a very shocked look on her face. Then he shut the door behind them, locked it, and hauled her over to his desk.

Before she could figure out his intent, he sat down and pulled her across his lap. He got her arm up behind her back and held it there. She kicked and fought, but she was no match for him.

She couldn't believe what happened next. He actually had the audacity to pull up her dress to the middle of her back, exposing her underwear. He wasn't going to... to... *spank* her, was he? As if in answer to her question, she felt him tug on the back of her panties, and suddenly, they were at her knees.

The man slapped her rear end so hard, she jumped. This couldn't be happening to her. A spanking? She was thirty! An adult!

He laid into her behind with what seemed like everything he had. The sound of the slaps filled the room, and she was in so much pain so fast, she could barely catch her breath.

This guy wasn't playing around; he was furious with her, and she didn't blame him, but this hurt!

"Stop!" she begged.

"No!" he replied, as he whacked her rear soundly.

"Please, I'm sorry!"

"Not sorry enough! I paid for twenty of your parking tickets! Twenty! At twenty-five dollars each! You're going to get one swat for each dollar I paid!"

"But that's over two hundred and fifty spanks!" she cried.

"Welcome to the new world, Miss I'm Trouble! You crossed the wrong man!" he pronounced, whaling on her behind with fearsome strikes.

Teresa had never felt this kind of pain before. This was terrible! How could this be happening?!

## A Fast Ticket to a Spanking

### Chapter Two

As furious as he was, Chas could barely believe the amazing rear end over his lap. It was beautiful. Yes, it was beginning to get a mottled red from his firm spanking, but he'd never seen a more gorgeous behind in all his life. High, rounded and tight, it was the ass of his dreams.

It was too bad the person attached to it was such a troublemaker. Her personalized license plate said it all: "IM TRBLE." Vengeance coursing through his veins, he smacked the spectacular behind with all he had. This was the little girl who had put over twenty parking tickets on his car—all of which he'd paid without actually reading them.

He was equally as mad at himself as he was with the brat across his knee, but she was the one who had wronged him. No one played Chas Wilson for a fool, and this young lady had made an absolute idiot out of him. Beyond that, when he'd caught her, she'd actually had the audacity to taunt him.

He saw her in his mind, in her car, laughing. "Thanks for paying for my parking tickets!" she'd cried before speeding away from him.

He spanked her harder. She wept and wailed and begged him to stop, but he wasn't nearly done with her yet.

Her butt now had speckles of purple along with the fire engine red color, and the girl cried so hard she could barely breathe, but he still didn't feel done. Too bad his hand was nearly at its limit. This was unexpectedly hard work. He'd broken out in a sweat and his arm was getting tired, but he was still so angry, he couldn't stop.

Finally, he reached his limit. He finished his handiwork with several colossal spanks on her sit spots, which caused her to squeal in pain. After a



few moments of admiring her lovely behind, he pulled up her panties and jerked down her dress.

He lifted her off, supporting her as he did so. Sobbing uncontrollably, she felt like a limp noodle. Well, that should teach her. He helped her stand.

"You understand who I am now, don't you? You won't ever do anything like this again to me or anyone else, will you?"

She sobbed, but didn't say anything back to him.

"Did you hear me, girl? You won't do anything like this again. Now if you apologize to me and promise never to do it again, I may not speak to your bosses about your lapse in judgment. It wouldn't do to lose your job over something like this, but if you're making bad choices about parking tickets, it doesn't speak well to your work."

"You son-of-a-bitch!" she screamed, startling him. "You're gonna take my job from me! You're gonna take my life from me! They were only parking tickets, you evil bastard! You think you're so great, making these lofty decisions? Well, it's easy when you're rich to make these judgments against people! You don't know what it's like to be on your own with no money! You're a jerk! A total jerk, and I hate you! You ruined my life! I hate you!"

Chas tried to say something, but the girl pushed on his chest hard and raced from the room, crying loudly.

After a second of shock, he followed her. But by the time he'd got out into the outer office, she was gone. Deborah examined him with all new eyes. And those eyes didn't approve of his behavior.

"Gordon Howe is on line one for you," she said, her mouth pursed in disapproval.

"Don't look at me like that," he snapped. "She put twenty parking tickets on my car. She deserved that."

"If she presses charges for assault, you could be in trouble, too. And I don't really need to tell you that, do I, Mr. Harvard Graduate?" Deborah asked reproachfully.

"You'd better watch it, or I may just put you across my knee, too," he snarled.

"Nice attitude. I do have a black belt, Mr. Anger Issues," she retorted.

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean that. That girl got me so rattled."

"Apparently. Gordon is still on line one, and since he means a few million to us, you'd better take it."

"Wait, who was that girl? I don't even know her name."

"I'll find out and make sure she's not going to sue you."

"Thanks, Deborah... I... thanks."

"Now calm down and go take that call."

"Yes, the call. Damn it, I need to follow her and talk to her. I didn't even get a chance to talk to her."

Deborah said, "You were too busy playing Neanderthal Disciplinarian."

He pointed down at his secretary. "I'm not sorry I spanked her. She deserved that."

"It's your practice," she said, turning away.

Swearing under his breath, Chas went back into his office to take the call. Damn this, anyway!

After the call, Chas went out to the outer office. "She came from Fillmore and Bruce, didn't she?"

Deborah turned to him. "Yes, but apparently, there's some confusion about whether she works there or not."

"What confusion?"

"Well, I talked to her supervisor, a woman named Beatrice, and Teresa—her name is Teresa—came screaming into the office saying she was quitting before she got fired, grabbed her purse and cried and screamed all the way out of the office before anyone could stop her. I was forced to explain what might have caused her reaction. Although, I whitewashed it for your sake. Beatrice was upset, too. The girl was getting a raise and a promotion today; apparently, she's dynamite in her job. They're all very impressed with her work, and now they're all very worried about her and more than a bit curious about why you and she had this... upset. Are you going to tell them what she did?"

Disturbing news. "No, of course, not. I don't want her to lose her job. But I did... sort of threaten to tell them."

Deborah nodded. "Good one."

"Look, she's way out of control," he responded defensively. "She put twenty of her own parking tickets on my car. If she's that good a worker, she's just undermining her career with thoughtless, self-destructive behavior."

"Well, it looks like she gave up her career because she thought you would ruin her."

"For God's sake."

"If you're nice and can sweet-talk Beatrice, you may be able to find out where Teresa lives and convince her to return to work."

"For God's sake."

Deborah jerked her head towards the door. "You made this mess; you'd better go clean it up."

"She put the parking tickets on my car, and now, suddenly, I'm the bad guy?"

"No, I think you're now an equal fault guy. Yes, she deserved it, but..."

"I did *not* take it too far."

"Lie to me, fine, just don't lie to yourself. You like that little girl. Don't you?"

Chas was determined to argue the point. "I resent that..."

Deborah stared at him, unconvinced.

He sighed. "Oh, Christ. Is it that obvious?"

"Yes, to me. I'm sure not to her. You didn't exactly go easy on her."

"No... I didn't. But damn it—"

"Look, I get it. I was here, remember? For the last month while you tried to track down the culprit? I understand. You should be angry; it was a rotten thing she did and she's lucky you're not pressing charges. However, I'm just saying that there was some added anger in there because of your attraction to her. When you approach her, just be clear about what you want from her. But I have to say, if you were trying to date her, you might have made too strong an impression on her... pun intended."

"Oh, Christ. No, she deserved that. But you're right; I should have spoken to her first. I should have... No, you're confusing me. She deserved that. Period. And you're right; she's lucky I didn't press charges. She's lucky she's not losing her job. Even though she just quit. Oh, God, this got so out of hand. And you're right; I got completely carried away with my emotions. She did infuriate me, probably because I'm so attracted to her. What a mess."

Deborah chuckled. "Well, you're not taking her crap, you did make *that* change since Belinda."

"Thanks," he said. "Damn it, I have to go find her and at least get her to go back to her office. She shouldn't quit."

"Good luck, Beatrice isn't too happy with you."

"I'll handle her."

---

Chas handled Beatrice, but it wasn't easy. She wanted to eat him for lunch. It took more fancy footwork than closing a five billion dollar deal. He had to make up an elaborate lie to cover for Teresa and take most of the responsibility for the argument. Then, the worst, he had to apologize. Which galled him, but it was worth it. He had to save Teresa's job.

She'd better be worth all this trouble. She'd better not be leading a double life. According to Beatrice—who went on and on about her attributes—Teresa was a paragon of virtue. And clearly, she thought Chas was Satan. But she did give him Teresa's address.

Teresa lived not far from him, but as with all big cities, a few blocks can mean a lot. She wasn't exactly in a bad part of town, but it wasn't great. By some stroke of luck, he found parking right near her building.

Chas had no idea what to say to her. Which was unusual; he was known for his silver tongue. But with this girl, he just didn't know where to start. He hoped she let him in. Well, he would insist on it. They had to settle this.

He buzzed her apartment from the lobby. No answer. He tried again. Still no answer. Maybe she hadn't come home. He tried one more time.

"What?" came her upset demand over the intercom.

He suddenly realized that there was no way she'd let him in. Not if she was still this upset.

He assumed a Southern drawl, one of the only accents he'd ever been able to do. "Fed Ex, ma'am. Are you Teresa Harris?"

"I didn't order anything."

"It's from Harry and David's, looks like a gift," he said.

"Oh. Oh, Christ, Aunt Ada. Okay, come on up."

As Chas approached her door, he decided to continue tricking her. He couldn't take the chance that she wouldn't let him in. Her job was at stake. And perhaps his future love life.

He knocked on her door and then stood out of sight of the peephole. As he'd hoped, she took the chain off the door and opened it wide.

"Hello," she said. When she saw him, her eyes got huge, and she made a fast retreat back into her apartment.

As she tried to close the door on him, he blocked the door open and rushed inside.

She screamed, "Fire!" very loudly.

He grabbed her and clamped his hand over her mouth.

He yelled out the hallway, "No fire, we were wrong. Don't worry, no fire here!" and then kicked the door shut, all the while wrestling with the squirming girl.

He was moving her towards her living room when she bit down on his hand, hard.

He screamed and let go. She ran for the door, but he reached her just as she got her hand on the doorknob.

He pulled her away, but she screamed for help, and he clamped his hand over her mouth once more, only tighter this time.

"I swear, if you bite me again, girl, I'll spank the living daylights out of you. Now stop this nonsense and listen to me. This is about your job. I've come here to save you from losing it. Now, if you'd just please stop fighting me and talk to me like a normal, rational person, we can straighten out this whole thing. Will you stop fighting me?"

Teresa struggled a bit more and then stopped. She nodded.

He hesitantly let go of her. She pushed away from him and retreated to the living room.

As he followed her, she spun on him. "Normal and rational? Is that what you call your... actions earlier? Normal and rational?"

"Yes. Well, I will admit, I may have been a little hard on you, but you—" She opened her mouth to retort, but he talked over her. "But you're damned lucky I'm not pressing charges. You are damned lucky that I covered for you at your office. I even made up some ghastly lie about misinterpreting something that you said that supposedly led to our huge fight. And I let that guard dog of a supervisor of yours make disparaging remarks about me. And I actually apologized. I, me, apologizing and covering for your absolutely immoral actions. I'll be damned if I'm going to let you accuse me of being some horrible monster. Yes, I spanked you and you're damned lucky I like you. If I didn't, you'd be getting booked into jail right now."

Glaring at him, she snorted and crossed her arms across her chest. "So I'm supposed to thank you for spanking me?"

"Well, you're not supposed to look at me like I'm some homicidal maniac."

"Oh," she said, seeming to catch herself. She dropped her arms and sighed. "I'm upset, and I'm confused."

"Well, that makes two of us."

His words finally seemed to sink in. "You... you really covered for me? You lied about our argument?"

"Yes, and I found it quite distasteful."

She looked confused. "Wait. I don't get this. Why did you cover for me?"

"I'm not sure. I think I actually like you."

This was apparently the last thing on her mind. She looked at him as if he were crazy. "You can't," she finally said.

"Tell me about it. Do you have any water? I'm parched."

"Oh, sure. I'm sorry, I should have asked you if you wanted something."

"No, I barged in here under false pretenses. But I am parched."

She nodded. "You want fizzy water or regular bottled water?"

"Fizzy water?" he asked, breaking into a questioning smile.

"You know, sparkling flavored waters? No sugar?"

"Oh, yes. Certainly, get me a 'fizzy' water," he said, amused.

"Lots of people call it fizzy water," she replied, somewhat defensively, yet she could tell he wasn't belittling her.

"I'm sure they do."

She tried to cover up a smile. "I'll be right back."

He took the opportunity to check out her apartment. You could tell a lot about someone by their home.

Her apartment wasn't much besides a living room. She had a Murphy bed in one wall, and the other door went to a small bathroom. He could see the kitchen, and it was the size of a postage stamp. He was very glad he'd bought his flat years before. It was gargantuan compared to her place.

She liked the beach; nearly all her artwork was ocean-themed. And she read voraciously. All her shelves were filled with books. He was pleased to see that several of the same novels he'd read were on her coffee table. She also seemed to have a sweet tooth. Even though there was hardly any



space for knickknacks, she had several dishes of candy around the place. He liked her even more. She also loved her family, there was an entire wall devoted to her loved ones. Charming.

Just then, she came into the room carrying two bottles of sparkling water.

"Here's a lemon, I'm having the same," she said, handing him one.

He took it and gave her a smile. "Thank you, Teresa."

"I don't even know your name," she said.

"Chas Wilson."

She seemed surprised. "Oh, wow. You're the... you're Chas Wilson?"

"Why? I—"

"But... you own that business. You are... I thought... well, that you'd be older."

He laughed. "Well, to some people, I am."

"You can't be more than thirty-five."

"Thirty-eight and thank you."

She smiled. He was enchanted. Her entire face changed. She was ten times more beautiful. Her blue eyes twinkled; her full lips curved sensually. All he could think about was kissing her.

He broke out of his reverie and drank some water. She did, too, and didn't take her eyes from him. She seemed to be looking at him through all new eyes.

"You want to sit down?" she asked.

"Thank you."

They sat there awkwardly for a few minutes, drinking their waters. Teresa looked away and seemed to be arguing with herself. She took a deep breath and then turned to him.

"Okay, while I'm still super angry with you for that horrible spanking— I can barely sit here—I have to get this out. I'm..." she sighed. She was obviously having difficulty with what she was trying

to say. "Darn it, Teresa, just say it. Okay, okay, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry. I... it was stupid and thoughtless and I just didn't have any money and a friend told me I should try it and it was dumb and yeah, I was trying to get away with something, and I liked getting even with some rich idiot, but I didn't know the rich idiot was you—oh. I'm sorry, I don't think you're an idiot. I just... when I was putting the tickets on your expensive car, I thought... oh, I just feel terrible. Now that I see you and you saved my job and... you really saved my job for me?"

He smiled, completely smitten with her. "Yes, I did. And the more I get to know you, the better I feel about that."

"It was stupid. I never do anything like that. I just couldn't afford those tickets and I like to wear these high heels and I can't walk that far in them and the parking garage is so far and so I park out on the street, but I forget to put the money in the meter and I... oh, hell."

He burst out in delighted laughter. "You have to be one of the most adorable people I've ever met."

She seemed shocked. "You think I'm adorable? After what I did to you? And said to you in that stupid traffic jam? You're nuts."

"I'll agree with you there. I must be if I'm interested in dating someone like you."

"Now you want to date me," she practically shrieked. But she didn't look upset; she just looked surprised—and guilty.

"Yes, I do. How about starting now. Let's go get a late lunch, shall we? Then we can call your office and tell them you'll be in tomorrow. No, wait, let's call them now."

"But I quit, and they—"

"Beatrice promised to hold your job until you called."

"She did? Oh, you talked to her. Really? I didn't lose my job?"

"No."

"Oh, I probably blew the promotion."

"No, I took full blame for the interaction. Just call. I think you'll find that everything is okay."

"Really?"

"Really."

With a bright smile that made his heart flip, she leapt up and rushed to the phone. It was clear from her end of the conversation that things were fine, and her job was secure.

She hung up and sent him a full wattage smile. He knew it. In that moment, for some reason, he'd fallen in love with her. Something about the look in her eye, the sweet smile, the ebullience in her demeanor; this was a woman he could live with for the rest of his life. Just to see that cheery smile in the morning would be worth it.

Now all he had to do was to convince her.

He took her to a favorite restaurant of his. He ordered the poached salmon salad, and she had a cheeseburger and fries, which amused him to no end.

Teresa sent him a sheepish smile when the waiter left. "I always want greasy stuff when I've had a traumatic day."

Chas felt a twinge of guilt about how hard he'd been on her, but kept his cool. He was now setting a foundation with this woman. He couldn't show too much weakness with her or she'd run all over him.

"So you're not married?" she asked. Then she seemed embarrassed. "Not that you look like the kind of guy to cheat, I just... you look..."

He laughed. She was so delightful! "I look married."

"Yes. Well... yes."

"You look married, too," Chas observed.

She nodded, her blonde hair falling about her slim shoulders. "I was. He... we... it... I'm glad I'm not married to him anymore."

"Did you like being married?"

"Oh, yeah. Just not to him. He was mean," she said.

"I'm sorry. Of course, so was my wife."

She took a sip of her coke. "When did you divorce her?"

"About five years ago. And I'm still single. Haven't found anyone worthwhile yet."

"Oh. Me, too."

"How long were you married," he asked.

"Ten years."

Chas was surprised. "You must have married young. How old are you?"

"Thirty. I was nineteen when I got married, when we were both in college. We got married, so we could get scholarships and live in married student housing. I mean, we were together, but... we certainly weren't ready for marriage, and then our problems just kept going. So do you want to get married again?"

"Yes."

"Me, too."

There was an awkward pause as he stopped himself from proposing on the spot. Then the food arrived.

They ate and he drove her back to her apartment. He stopped the car at the curb and prepared to let her go.

She opened the door and turned to him, "I... do you want to come up and have some dessert? Or do you have to get back?"

"I have to get back, but I need dessert."

She seemed very excited. A thrill went through him.

When he got out of his car, he noticed that someone had keyed his door. He tried not to explode—he didn't want to scare her—but he was furious. She hung back and let him fume a bit. They went into her apartment, and she offered him an astounding array of dessert choices. He settled for ice cream.

Teresa handed him the ice cream, but seemed upset. He ate his dessert and finally noticed that she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

He put his empty bowl on the coffee table and was about to ask her what was wrong when she abruptly got up, marched over to him, pulled down her panties and threw herself across his lap.

He got an instant erection at the sight of her beautiful, yet bruised behind. "What—"

"I did it," she wailed, already crying. "Don't hate me! I didn't know you were nice! Just spank me and get it over with!"

"Wait, Teresa, what did you do?"

"I keyed your car! It was me! I was mad because you spanked me, but I didn't know you were nice."

He tried to stop himself, but his anger flared at the thought. He spanked her vigorously for a few minutes, and then stopped.

She looked up at him, her beautiful blue eyes glistening with tears. "Is that it? I keyed your car!"

He brought her up and set her in his lap. "I'm so proud of you."

Teresa seemed shocked. "Proud of me? I'm horrible!"

"You confessed, and you presented yourself for punishment. That was brave and just of you."

"It was?"

"It was." He couldn't stand it any longer and kissed her. She opened her mouth for him, inviting him in. Nothing had ever tasted as good as this little

girl. He tried not to, but he dominated her mouth. Commandeered her. His passions began to carry him away. He stopped and pushed her back a bit.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—" was all he got out before she attacked him.

She had him on his back on the couch with his pants unbuckled before he could think. He tried to stop himself; he wanted to take things slowly with her, but she took his underwear down and leapt on top of him and guided him inside her before he could stop her.

And oh, what a glorious lovemaking session ensued. He was sure he'd died and gone to Heaven. All he wanted was her. Forever.

After making love to her all over her tiny apartment, he gave them both tremendous orgasms. He felt he'd reached the pinnacle of his life with this girl.

They collapsed on the couch, sweaty and laughing.

Teresa turned to him and blurted, "I want to marry you!"

Her face turned ashen, her eyes widened with fear. When she opened her mouth to protest, he shut her up with a kiss.

When he pulled away, he said, "I accept. As long as you let me make some decisions once in awhile."

Teresa burst into tears and threw her arms around his neck. Chas couldn't remember a time in his life that he was happier.

