



# *Fiery Ember*

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## Chapter One

Ember paced. To and fro, fro and to, and fro and fro and to and... Wait. She lost her train of thought. What was she doing again? Oh, right, pacing.

She paused at the far end of the expansive conference room and stared out the window, watching the people below. Everyone walked, or ran, at break-neck speed. Hustling and bustling to their destinations. She shook her head, not understanding how so many people could be in such a hurry.

Metal grated against metal as the doorknob turned.

She cringed, knowing someone was coming through the door to interrupt her panic attack—just when she'd forgotten why she'd begun panicking and pacing in the first place. Of course it would be Marnie intruding. She wouldn't leave her alone, not even for a few moments. True friends never did, Marnie always said.

Ember turned, her bare feet sliding easily on the plush carpet, her shoes forgotten underneath the conference table. She nibbled her lower lip, waiting for her best friend to speak.

When the silence drew out past a few seconds, she couldn't take it anymore. "Well? Tell me they showed up, Marnie. Please?"

Marnie shook her head. "No, sorry hon, they haven't. I tried calling your stepmother, but Claudette isn't answering her phone. Constance isn't either, and last I heard, Clementine lost hers yesterday."

"Perfect," Ember mumbled as she turned her back to Marnie. She leaned her head against the window and the cool glass helped calm her racing heart.

What the heck was she to do now? None of the heads of Ellason Advertising had bothered to show up to *the* meeting with the President of *the* company whose account would single-handedly save their sorry-ass excuse for an ad agency.

*Bother, bollocks and balls*, as her father would say. Ember had grown up with her father's edicts repeated daily, and still, years upon years after his death, she followed them to the letter

whenever possible. *Educated individuals don't lower themselves by using common language, Fireball.*

The closest her father ever came to cursing was the word “balls.” Same with his friends and associates whenever they were around him. He censured everyone, letting them know that his little Fireball wouldn’t be spouting words like “damn” and “hell.” “Balls” was bad enough, thank you.

Thoughts of her father and what he must think as he watched her from his perch above intruded, and the telltale sting of tears formed in her eyes. Ember squeezed them tight as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

*Not today. I don't have time to fall apart today.*

“Ember?”

*Marnie, right.* “I’ll...” she swallowed hard as she thought up one idea after another, discarding them all. She couldn’t lose this account. She’d sat in on so many meetings with Jacob, Clementine, and their team that she knew the presentation like the back of her hand. She could do this. She *would* do this.

“Show them into the conference room in fifteen minutes, Marnie. Also, fetch Jacob for me. I’ll have to fill him in on my plans.”

Ember crouched down to pick up her shoes and then placed them on the floor in front of her before stepping into them. She smoothed her palms over her skirt to make sure there were no wrinkles present.

“What are you going to do, Em?”

Ember stared at Marnie, just long enough to see the blood drain from her friend’s face. “I’m going to give the presentation myself. I know just as much about this campaign as Clementine. Besides, if it were so darned important to her, she’d be here and not *cavorting* with some random man.” Ember nodded, resolved that her decision was the right one.

“But what... what are we going to tell Mr. Ashe? He’s expecting—”

“Let him come to his own conclusions. Don’t introduce me by name; just show him in. I’ll handle the rest. Now hurry, send Jacob in with everything so I can go over the presentation one more time.” Ember shooed her friend away and turned back to the window.

*What the hell am I doing? A secretary can't give this presentation. I'm nothing more than a highly paid barista and pencil pusher. No wonder Daddy left the company to Claudette and not me. He must have known even then...*

\* \* \* \*

“As you can see Mr. Ashe, the proposal we’ve outlined introduces your company to the buyers of today. We’ve included print, radio, and television venues in our plan. It is sure to bring your company to the forefront of every 18 to 25-year-old’s mind. Feel free to take the presentation materials home to review and we can schedule—”

“Not needed.”

He didn’t even give her a chance to finish.

Ember turned her attention to Mr. Ashe and focused on his chin. She’d blundered and made eye contact when he’d introduced himself. She would not make that mistake again. Jacob had to intervene on her behalf and showed Mr. Ashe to his seat while she stared at him, mouth gaping wide.

Blue. His eyes were blue like an early morning sky as the sun begins to rise. She was mesmerized. She didn’t say a word, didn’t move a muscle. All she could do was stare at the darned man with her mouth hanging open. Of course, it wasn’t just his eyes that attracted her. Oh no.

Paul Ashe’s face appeared to have been chiseled from granite by Michelangelo himself. His patrician features with the hard angles of his cheeks and how they connected with the firm lines of his jaw, all flowing to his strong chin, reminded her of an ancient Roman warrior.

Then, he smiled. Geez-o-pete, she’d never seen a smile light up a room. Sure, she’d read about plenty of fantasy men. Their glaring white teeth, perfect bodies and model-like ability to always look handsome, even after riding through a downpour in the middle of Scotland’s highlands, but she’d never witnessed anything like that. Until now.

Mr. Ashe had shaken her hand. She remembered that now as she stared at the tiny scar on his chin and wondered where he’d gotten it. Of course, her thoughts didn’t stay on his chin for long, not when she had his broad shoulders and sculpted chest to think about. Not long after he’d taken his seat, he removed his jacket and leaned back in the executive chair while she began her spiel. His shirt was far too tight for her comfort and showed off every muscle on his chest and abdomen. Every, single, one.

Lately, she hadn’t spared a thought for men, any man, but now her neglected libido was rearing its ugly, horny, come-fuck-me head. Thoughts of rolling around in a sweaty tangle of limbs with Paul Ashe occupied her mind while she tried to focus on convincing him to take the materials home, to give Ellason Advertising a chance.

What good was Ember Ellason to the world if she couldn't land one single account? Heck, why was she even attending college at night, trying to get her degree in marketing if she couldn't convince the man to take home one binder of information?

She dropped her shoulders, accepting defeat. "I understand, Mr. Ashe—"

"No, apparently you don't." His tone was clipped, sharp and angry, as Claudette often sounded. Ember couldn't hide her instinctive twitch when he stood. She had to remind herself that Jacob sat only feet away. Mr. Ashe wouldn't strike her for whatever mistake she'd made with someone else present. At least, Claudette never had. "Ms. Eagerton, I won't be taking the materials home because I've made a decision."

She opened her mouth to speak, but she wasn't sure what she was going to say. On one hand, she wanted to correct his assumption that she was Clementine and on the other, she wanted to beg him to reconsider their firm. She closed her mouth and didn't do either.

"I'd like Ellason Advertising to represent my company. The ad campaign you've outlined is perfect."

He stuck his hand out and she slid her fingers over his palm before wrapping them around his hand. Goosebumps rose along her arm and she fought the shiver racing down her spine. Heat and an immediate attraction assaulted her. With a gasp, her attention turned to his face. She had to see his reaction. Was he as affected by the touch?

Without a doubt, he was. His eyes widened, his pale blue irises deepened to almost black. Yeah, he felt the tremor course through her hand and he answered with a twitch of his own. Her breath caught as they continued to stare at one another. She *knew* she'd been avoiding his eyes for a reason. His grip tightened and he flashed that darned perfect smile again, making her powerless to look away. Her knees felt weak and she couldn't resist the soft tug on her hand, which brought them closer together.

His smile, still wide and dazzling, never faltered as he whispered two words which nearly sent her into a dead faint. "You're perfect."

She swallowed hard past the lump forming in her throat. Perfect? Not hardly. Chubby, fat, even obese by some people's definition, but perfect definitely did not describe her. True, she always tried hard to look her best. Today happened to be one of her "pretty" days where her wayward auburn curls behaved and the outfit she wore hugged in the right places and flowed in all the curvier areas.

When the heat of her blush hit her cheeks, Ember tugged her hand free of his and turned her attention to straightening the meeting materials.

Jacob jumped into the conversation then and saved her from further embarrassment. “Yes, we think so as well, Mr. Ashe. Um, *Em*, is by far *the* woman for the job. We at Ellason Advertising are thrilled to handle your company’s business and look forward to implementing our plan.”

The two men continued to talk while she got her feelings under control. Her hands shook as she straightened the sample materials. Lord, she’d never been looked at like that. Men gave her a cursory glance and nod when she asked them what they’d like to drink, coffee or water, as they waited for Claudette or one of her two daughters. But her? Ember? Never.

Ember was invisible to everyone. Being invisible is how she’d survived in the Ellason-Eagerton family. Being noticed meant... well, it just wasn’t good. Not good at all.

Her sweat dampened fingers stuck to the ad copy and she wiped her palms on her skirt, hands shaking with every movement. Her nerves that she’d kept at bay from the moment she found out she’d be giving the presentation were now making themselves known. She needed a drink. A long, tall, hard drink of Mr. Paul Ashe... *No!* She needed a quick shot of something strong and she’d be fine. She most definitely did *not* need anything beyond a signature from Paul Ashe. Nope. No sweet, tender kisses or long nights of sweaty sex needed. No sir. Nope. Not at all.

Of course, all thoughts of why she should have wild sex with Mr. Ashe vanished when she regained her composure and turned back to the two men. Yeah, he was covered in muscles from head to toe beneath his expensive suit, but it was his eyes and his smile that reeled her in. She really needed to remember to stare at his chin.



## *Chapter Two*

Ember sat back against the cool plastic surface of her regular booth at Fire & Smoke and allowed her muscles to relax. As each second passed, the tension in her shoulders and back eased.

After embarrassing herself further in front of Mr. Paul Ashe, Ember had retreated to her small cubicle outside of Claudette and her daughters' offices, content with shuffling paper until it was time to leave at five. Marnie must have sensed her remaining nervous tension because even she stayed away. Heck, everyone did. Mr. Ashe and Jacob remained in the conference room for at least another half hour after her hasty retreat.

Not that Ember noticed or anything, because she didn't. She didn't care. Nope, she didn't care one bit. And the sight of his perfectly sculpted ass definitely *hadn't* affected her as he'd left the office. Suffice it to say, Mr. Paul Ashe looked good coming *and* going. She silently prayed that Jacob had taken care of providing him with a contract.

The clink of a full bottle being placed in front of her brought Ember out of her thoughts—and not a moment too soon. Thinking about a contract with Mr. Ashe led her to think about what a contract did. It bound. Binding led to thinking of being bound by him and all the wicked things he could do to her while she was tied and at his mercy.

She smiled her thanks to the waitress, Anna, and took a sip of the cold beer that was placed in front of her. With a soft bite, the cool, bubbly liquid slid down her throat to relax her from the inside out. It had either been far too long since she had taken a lover, or Mr. Paul Ashe was just that hot. She closed her eyes, took another sip of beer and admitted that he was just that hot.

Other than showing Ember yet another man she couldn't have, the meeting also showed her that it was time to find another job. She'd proven she could handle a project on her own as well as land a client with nary a senior partner in sight.

After four years of balancing her schoolwork while working days at Ellason Advertising, it was time for Ember to move on to other things. Her father obviously thought Claudette was the woman to run the company, so there was nothing else holding her at her dead-end job where the

highlight of her day was making a new pot of coffee. She could be a secretary anywhere. What she wanted to be was something entirely different, but she'd never realize her dreams at Ellason Advertising.

More tension eased as she reached a decision. Tomorrow, bright and early, she'd type up her letter of resignation and slap it on the old bitc—broad's desk. No time like the present to begin her new life.

The tight chignon she'd managed to wrestle her hair into earlier in the day pulled and tugged at her sensitive scalp.

*Balls.*

This night was about being comfortable and the tight coil was anything but. With a few quick tugs at the bobby pins, her hair tumbled free of the knot and she sank further into the cushioned booth. The dark, secluded corner was Ember's favorite spot in the whole bar for two reasons: it was dark and secluded. Fire & Smoke was the one place she could come and be herself. With her father's old friend Ernest running the place, she could be assured of being left alone while she unwound.

The moment she bowed her head and sent up a prayer to God, thanking him for a quiet corner of the world where she could relax, but not be alone, someone slid into the booth across from her. Aged plastic groaned and moaned.

Years of living with Claudette had taught Ember to remain still and not show any outward reaction. She could shake on the inside all she wanted, but to her tormentor, she needed to show strength and not fear.

Ember tilted the condensation-slick bottle back and took a hearty swig, filling her mouth with the slowly warming brew before she lifted her head from the back of the booth and opened her eyes. Of course, she then spit the entire mouthful of beer all over Mr. Paul Ashe.

"*Paul.*" His name, as well as the beer, left her mouth at the same time, though she hadn't originally planned on spitting all over the person who had joined her. It just sort of happened that way.

Like everything else in Ember's life.

Eyes wide and mouth gaping open, Paul let out a low gasp and froze. She couldn't do anything other than stare in shock as her heart stopped for a few seconds before picking up a racing pace. Lord, she'd just spit a mouthful of liquid on the object of her lust.

*One-way ticket to hell please?*

This time around, she kept her eyes trained on his chin while she snatched a handful of napkins from the table and rushed to his side. She dabbed at the areas covered in spittle and beer and cringed with each touch. No way would he sign the contract now. None whatsoever.

She risked a glance at his face, making sure to keep her eyes away from his. She couldn't figure out what he was thinking. Of course, he hadn't said anything yet and if she were dealing with Claudette, she would recognize this as the quiet before the storm. But he wasn't her evil-tempered stepmother and it almost looked as if he was smiling. His lips formed something half way between a frown and a grin. A grown maybe? Or a grin?

Ember shook her head and focused on the task of wiping Paul clean of her drink. As her hands approached the lower half of his shirt, she let her gaze wander to his lap and froze for a moment.

*Well, fuck me.*

Her father was surely frowning down on her for that thought, but she didn't spend too much time worrying about her father's opinion and moved on to other... *larger* things.

Paul Ashe was packing. No, not a gun, but a *thing* so much bigger than she could have ever imagined. It seemed to point upward as if reaching for her, and she wanted to cup and stroke it... He stopped her. A large, tan hand encircled her wrist and forced her to freeze in mid-motion as she reached for his *thing*. It seemed with her almost bold move, she'd shocked him into finding his voice.

"I've got it from here, but thanks anyway." His voice sounded deeper, rough and strained as he spoke, his lips inches from her ear. She felt the blush creeping up her cheeks and was thankful for the darkness that shrouded her corner of the bar. With a nod, she eased her wrist from his grip and slid back into the booth across from him.

"I'm so sorry, Paul. You... you surprised me," she chuckled, more than a little self-conscious.

The shadows left most of his face in darkness and she breathed a sigh of relief. If she couldn't see him, he couldn't see her. More importantly, those darned blue eyes couldn't capture her and turn her into a walking, not-talking idiot.

"Yeah, well, the beer shower was a bit of a surprise to me as well." He laughed, deep and hearty, as he wiped away the rest of her "beer shower."

The rising tension in Ember's shoulders eased. He didn't seem mad. Mad people didn't laugh, so she was probably safe for the time being. She shook her head. Why were her thoughts

constantly flowing in that direction? Ember always seemed to expect the worst in people, and other than Claudette and her two daughters, Clementine and Constance, most people failed to meet those horrid expectations. Perhaps it was time to raise the bar a bit and hope for behavior better than that of her stepmother and stepsisters.

“No? It wasn’t a surprise to you? So you planned to spit beer on me?”

She stopped shaking her head and caught his smile. “That’s not why I was shaking my head. I really am sorry about that, though. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” She almost said she hadn’t expected to see him ever again, but caught herself.

Anna returned and saved her from making a bigger fool out of herself in front of Paul. She toyed with her beer bottle while he placed his order. She was amazed by all the food he ordered. The man had to be starved.

“Well, I was expecting to see you here.”

Ember snapped her head up and tipped over her beer bottle at the same time, effectively spilling the remainder of her drink all over the table. Once again, she snatched napkins from the dispenser and mopped at the mess she’d made. At least this time the drink didn’t end up all over him.

Paul slid his hands over hers, stopping her frantic cleaning. His breath fanned over her ear and blew her hair as he spoke. “Calm down. No need to be so jumpy. I just wanted to have dinner with you and you disappeared. Marnie told me where to find you.”

She swallowed hard and relinquished her hold on the soaked napkins. Noticing Anna’s approach, she slumped into the booth seat and smiled at the waitress as she placed their drinks and an appetizer in front of them.

The silence dragged on and on. Ember hated long silences. When her father had grown ill, they tended to signal further deterioration of his health. “So, Marnie spilled the beans on the location of the bat cave? I’m going to have to find a new sidekick.” *Humor. Lighten the mood. Hottie came looking for me for a reason.*

“It is awfully dark. What did you do, loosen one of the bulbs?”

Damn him. Ernest had never caught her at her game in years, yet Paul caught her within minutes. She couldn’t help but grin. “Yeah, the ambiance it lends the table is amazing, right?” She waved her arm, gesturing to her darkened corner.

“It is. But it seems darker on your side of the table...” His words trailed off and she was struck mute as he rose from his side and scooted into the booth next to her. He had to physically

shift her over with his hip as he settled into the seat, his arm slung across the back and fingertips nearly touching her shoulder. Then, he gifted her with another of his deep whispers that only she could hear. "It's just dinner. Nothing that happens tonight, or any other night, changes what happened in the conference room today, and nothing that does or doesn't happen will change the fact that the contract is signed."

She didn't know if he'd felt or seen her unease, but his few whispered words smoothed her rattled nerves like a soft caress. "You signed the contract already?"

"Yep, that's what took a bit longer. Your assistant, Jacob, had legal draw it up and I signed while I was at your office." His fingertips tickled the bare skin just below her shoulder. "I didn't want there to be anything misconstrued about me showing up here. Since I'd already decided that your proposal was amazing, as are you, I wanted everything wrapped up before I came after you."

"Is that what this is? You're 'coming after' me?" She raised an eyebrow at him and wasn't sure if the shadows would allow him to see her expression.

"How about wooing? Does that sound better? 'Cause I'd already decided after I'd stared at you and listened to that sweet voice of yours that I wanted to get to know you better. No strings, just two people having dinner to see where it leads. What do you say?"

She'd never been wooed before. Men had taken her out on dates, but since she didn't see herself as someone worth wooing, they hadn't ever put too much effort into the act either. Yet, here sat the most gorgeous man Ember had ever laid eyes on and he wanted to woo and see where it led.

"Why not?"

## *Chapter Three*

It led to the bedroom. Okay, several drinks, hours of conversation, and being too drunk to drive herself home led them to his bedroom.

Damn, even that wasn't exactly the truth.

There were quite a few soft, sensuous kisses, which attributed to their arrival at his home. Some of them as she laid her head on his shoulder in the booth and he brushed his lips across her forehead, whispering naughty words which made her blush. Another when she turned her head, emboldened by his sensual promises, and captured his lips for their first, searing kiss. At the first touch of her lips to his, she knew there would be no going back.

She'd already made the promise to herself that she'd be giving notice at Ellason Advertising, so there truly was nothing holding her back from spending one wild night with Paul. A tiny niggling strain of guilt twisted in the back of her mind over telling Paul her true identity, but she brushed it aside. One night of passion and then she'd start a new life with a new job and never look back. If their one night shared meant a few uncomfortable moments when Paul and Clementine actually met, too bad.

Ember leaned against the doorjamb, running her fingers lightly over Paul's jaw as he fought with the locks on his front door. His whiskers prickled her skin, sending shivers and goose bumps along her arm. She wanted to feel his five o'clock shadow anywhere and everywhere.

Finally, after a long minute of man against steel, Paul shoved the door open with a growl before snatching her hand in his and tugging her through the doorway. He paused long enough to kick the door closed, then scooped her into his arms and strode deeper into the darkened house.

For a moment she strained her eyes to see through the darkness, but quickly gave up. Seeing what his house looked like could wait, stripping Paul naked couldn't.

She wound her arms around his neck, nuzzling the prickly skin. She couldn't help herself. The masculine scent of musk surrounded her, infusing into her very soul with each breath. She flicked her tongue out, tasting him for the first time, and wasn't disappointed. Salt and man

exploded on her taste buds and his moan transferred from his body to hers, zinging straight to her core.

“Em...” She sucked a bit of his flesh into her mouth, nipping him with care before releasing it. “Dammit, Em...”

Guilt tweaked her, but she shoved it away. He probably called her “Em” because Jacob did, and she assumed he was under the impression that “Em” was short for Clementine. She opened her mouth to tell him the truth, but his heavy breathing changed her mind.

She buried her face against his shoulder, smiling over the affect she had on him. So many times she’d wondered if the men she dated wanted to be with her, or closer to those that controlled Ellason Advertising. For once, she knew without a doubt that Paul wanted *her*.

“Right here,” she whispered against his neck, seconds before nibbling his shoulder through the expensive dress shirt he wore.

Ember didn’t have time to say much else as he released her and she flopped onto his bed. The large king-sized bed dominated the room. She took a second to scan her surroundings before returning her attention to Paul.

He wrenched his tie from around his neck and began working at releasing the buttons of his shirt. The entire time, his gaze remained focused on her.

She didn’t know what to do. Every other time she’d been with a man, he’d been the one to take charge and undress her while she undressed him in return. This man seemed happy with allowing her to be a spectator. Of course, that didn’t last long.

Paul gave up on the buttons of his shirt, choosing instead to simply rip the material from his chest, sending the buttons and shirt flying. Bare from the waist up, chiseled muscles flexed and strained with each of his breaths. His broad shoulders gave way to a solid chest and carefully crafted abs. A sprinkling of hair dusted his lower abdomen and disappeared beneath the waistband of his slacks. She let her eyes wander lower, imagining the dark brown curls framing his hard cock as it strained toward her. The bulge in his pants proved that he wanted her, badly.

Pussy throbbing in time with her own heartbeat, she pushed off her shoes and they landed on the carpeted floor with a soft thump. She fumbled with the waist of her skirt, hands trembling as she fought with the elastic and prayed he wouldn’t turn away from her after seeing her nude. She didn’t *think* he would, but insecurities reared their ugly head.

His soft one word order didn’t help matters. “Stop.” Ember froze, unsure how to proceed. “Let me.”

There was the answer to her question. Ember eased back down onto the bed and remained passive as Paul joined her. Instead of remaining standing and divesting her of her clothes, he edged between her thighs, straining the fabric of her skirt. He leaned forward, capturing her lips in a soft kiss, his tongue teasing her.

Gentle swipes of his nubile, warm flesh taunted her until she sucked his tongue into her mouth, taking hold and refusing to relinquish her possession. He moaned in response, which only served to drive her arousal higher. She rotated her hips against his, cupping his hardening cock with her now-wet pussy.

Lord, the man had gotten to her. In one night of shared secrets and schnapps she'd begun using words like "cock" and "pussy."

Her tongue tangled with his, fighting for dominance and mimicking the motion of her hips. Stroke, slide, flick, lick. She tasted every inch of his mouth, reveling in the heat and moisture he shared as his taste exploded on her tongue. Dark. Primitive. Male.

He rocked his hips against her and she whined low in her throat, frustrated with the layers of cloth separating them. One of his hands shifted from its position near her head to slide down her side and she jumped, unaccustomed to the contact. "Shhh... Just... Just let me."

She'd let him do anything, everything right now. She didn't flinch when he grasped the material of her skirt. Nor did she protest when he eased it up along her thighs, only pausing when the bulk of the material pooled at her waist.

"Want to..." His mouth had left hers for a split second, but it was too long. She arched and captured his lips again. "Let me, Em," he panted against her lips.

Then his mouth disappeared while he leaned back to kneel between her legs. Suddenly, she realized her position: Half-dressed, with her skirt hiked around her waist and pale thighs spread wide. She couldn't imagine the picture she painted.

"Beautiful." Starting at her knees, he skimmed the sensitive skin with his palms, stopping a mere inch from her panty-clad pussy.

*Pussy.* He'd said the word often enough in the booth at the bar as their topics of discussion roamed from business to pleasure. She'd been shocked at first over his frank language, unaccustomed to those words being used outside of porn movies. But every time he uttered the word, her pussy clenched in response, tightening without her conscious thought.

"So beautiful."



Ember felt heat building in her abdomen and spreading outward. She still couldn't manage to accept a compliment. Especially when the man giving her the compliment was staring at her *there*.

She tensed her muscles, intent on closing her legs and blocking his view, but he wouldn't have it. "Nu uh, Em." He hooked his fingers beneath the elastic of her panties and before she could blink, he pulled them free of her legs. "You're mine."

Frozen in shock, she didn't move, didn't even breathe while he looked his fill. The cool air from the air conditioner collided with her slick heat and made her even more conscious of the state of her body. Her own juices covered her labia in moisture that had actually soaked through her panties.

She whimpered and pleaded for him to end her torment. "Please..."

It seemed her gentle urging was all he needed. Spreading her legs wider and opening her even more, he stroked her inner thighs from knee to hip and back again. Over and over, his palms glided over her hot skin while his gaze remained intent on the juncture of her thighs.

*Why won't he do something?*

Ember wanted to cry and scream in frustration. The whisper-like strokes of his skin against hers did nothing to assuage her arousal. In contrast, it made her burn hotter; made the ache in her pussy grow stronger.

"Tell me what you want, Em." He focused his attention on her face, then stared into her eyes. "Say it."

"I want you to touch me... *there*." It had been a topic of his teasing at the bar, her inability to curse or say lewd words. They'd laughed and joked and she blushed with every new attempt. It appeared his teasing had turned into more once they crossed the threshold of his bedroom.

"Where?" He slid his palms to her knees. "Here?"

She shook her head. He knew where. She just needed to gather the balls to tell him. Preferably before she burst into flames from his touch.

"How about here?" He kneaded the tops of her thighs, thumbs getting precariously close to her mound, but not quite.

She shook her head again. "No. My..." She licked her lips. "My pussy. Please, Paul, touch my pussy."

"Just touch?" He eased over her, bracing his weight on his hands on either side of her head and she ached to kiss him again. "Or do you want more?"

Paul pressed his covered, hard cock against her wet folds, rubbing his length against her as his breath mingled with hers.

“More. I want it all, Paul.”

He didn’t react to her declaration at first. Instead he rocked his hips against her, driving his shaft along her slit. He didn’t appear to care that her juices were soaking into his expensive suit pants. If he wasn’t going to bat a lash at ruining thousand dollar pants, she wouldn’t either. She arched against him, begging for more friction with each pass.

“Want my fingers in your pussy, Em? I’m going to slide them into your sopping pussy and suck on your clit until you come in my mouth. Your cream will cover my hand as I finger fuck you. Then, when I’m done, I’m going to slide my cock into you. Slowly at first, and then I’ll fuck you like you’re begging for it. Is that what you want? Want me to taste that sweet pussy before I make love to you?” He whispered his words, softly, between pants and moans as they writhed together. She didn’t understand how he could bother with asking questions at a time like this. Didn’t he see her straining and aching for release?

“Yes. God, *yes*. Just... *please*.”

Suddenly, his weight was gone, as was the glorious cloth-covered shaft she’d had between her legs. Paul lay on his stomach between her legs and sheer embarrassment wouldn’t allow her to watch him any longer. He’d seen the lower half of her naked and now he was getting up close and personal with her pussy. Hell in a hand basket—that’s where she was headed.

Those same strong hands that had teased and tormented her all night eased along her inner thighs, stroking and kneading the flesh of her legs. She held her breath as he inched closer to her pussy, heart pounding a staccato beat in her chest. Anticipation curled in her belly and spread through her body as she waited to see if he would fulfill the sensual promises he’d been telling her about all night.

Finally, finally his smooth fingertips grazed her outer lips and her back arched from the bed. Tickles of pleasure radiated from the juncture of her thighs as he stroked her labia. Up and down. Up and down.

Then, when she didn’t think she could take any more of his teasing, he slipped a finger between her labia, stroking the super-sensitive inner lips of her pussy. This time, she could not hold back the moans and groans of pleasure when that fingertip grazed her clit.

“Yes... *please*.”

Hot breath fanned over her and she shivered. "Like that, baby?" He whispered against her heated, moist skin. "Like me stroking that little clitty?"

She couldn't think, couldn't speak. Not when his fingers danced along her slit, tormenting her with his heated touch and even hotter words. Instead, she rocked against his hand, begging for more without words.

Paul didn't disappoint.

He brought his other hand into play. In a slow, grinding thrust, he buried two fingers in her pussy and immediately her muscles clenched around the erotic invasion. Full, just how she liked. Her orgasm approached.

His fingers slid in and out of her cunt easily, her natural lubrication easing the way for him. While his fingers stroked her, his thumb circled her clit, playing ring around the rosy; she couldn't wait to fall down.

Round and round he circled her tiny nubbin. With each circle of his thumb, his fingers gestured in a "come here" motion deep within her pussy.

Circle.

Come here.

Circle.

Come here.

Circle.

Come.

*Damn she wanted to come.*

He repeated the gestures and with each repetition, unimaginable pleasure slithered through her body.

Her cunt clenched and spasmed around his invading fingers. With each tightening of her inner walls, tremors shot through her from head to toe. Toes. Fuck, her toes curled and gripped the blanket beneath her. Breath panting, heart near to bursting, she ached and throbbed like never before. Closer and closer the prize she'd been chasing from the first moment Paul uttered the word "pussy" neared.

She wanted to shatter in his arms and let him put her back together like a finely crafted glass slipper.

So close. So close and so far and somewhere in between, her orgasm danced out of reach. She whined and pleaded, begging for Paul to do something, anything and more.

“Come for me Em. Come on my fingers like you’ll come on my cock, baby.”

She shook her head.

“You can do it. Come and then I’ll fuck you and make love to you like no other.”

Talk of fucking and being fucked brought her higher and her body reacted without her. Her pussy clenched rhythmically around Paul’s fingers, milking him. She came with a scream, Paul’s name on her lips while her abdomen tightened and her body acted as if it wanted to curl into a small ball of immense pleasure.

Paul continued. He kept circling, rubbing, and stroking her as the tremors eased and slowed to a sporadic tightening of muscles and nerves until he finally pulled his fingers free of her pussy.

Ember whimpered and opened her eyes to look at him. His eyes locked onto hers, he slipped two fingers into his mouth and moaned. Not just any two fingers. No, he licked, sucked, and cleaned the two fingers that had been inside her... and he acted like he liked it. Hell, almost as if he enjoyed her taste.

*Whoa.*

Before she could blink, Paul eased away from her and stood by the bed. Gazes still intent on one another, she could see his desire for her burning bright in his eyes. Leather sliding against leather distracted her and she focused on the movements of his hands as he slipped his belt off. As soon as the belt was discarded, the pants began to follow. The wet spot on the front of his slacks didn’t matter any longer. She wanted what the finely woven wool held within.

She didn’t have to wait long.

Paul flicked the button and lowered the zipper with lightning speed to reveal his cock. Gods, how could she have ever thought of a man’s cock as a *thing*, an “it” to be feared? Paul was... beautiful. Her fingers itched to stroke him, pet him, as he had done to her. But her inexperience kept her frozen to her spot on the bed. He could ask, direct her, but she wouldn’t make the first move.

She licked her lips, imagining his taste. His skin had been clean and slightly salty; she imagined his male musk was more concentrated around his cock.

Dark hair surrounded Paul’s erection, an extension of the hair on his stomach and chest. His cock appeared to be about eight inches in length and her mouth watered at the thought of wrapping her lips around his wide girth. Just when she was building the courage to ask if she could have a taste, he changed directions on her.

“I think someone’s a bit overdressed.”

Her attention shot to his face. The man simply smirked and quirked a brow at her. Did they really have to get all the way naked?

“Yes, you really have to get all the way naked. I want to kiss and lick every inch of you, starting with your mouth, all the way to your toes and back again.”

Ember dropped back onto the bed with a gasp and covered her mouth. “I said that out loud?”

Paul crawled between her legs, this time it was his heated, uncovered cock nestling into the valley of her pussy. She closed her eyes with a moan, hips rising to meet his.

He nibbled and nipped the fingers covering her mouth. “Yeah, you did. Now, let’s get you naked. You have to be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on and I can’t wait to see all of you.”

She swallowed hard. “There’s a lot to see,” she whispered, wincing at how idiotic and needy she sounded.

“More for me to love, baby. More for me to lick, suck, fuck and make love to *all* night.”

She shook her head. Nope. No one wanted her all night, least of all a hunk like Paul Ashe.

“Quit shaking your head at me or I’ll turn you over my knee. Men can’t lie about what turns them on, Em, and my cock is so hard I could hang a billboard from it.”

Suddenly, the image of a giant billboard hanging from Paul’s erect cock, in the middle of Times Square, filled her mind and she couldn’t hold back the laugh. She opened her eyes, stared into Paul’s and felt herself relax. He was right. A man wouldn’t be as hard as he was if he weren’t interested. From the shaft nestled in her cleft, she knew the man on top of her was *very* interested.

He pressed a kiss to her nose. “That’s better. Now, let’s strip you so I can have my wicked way with you.”

It didn’t take long for Paul to get his way once he’d set his mind to something. Like a dog with a bone, he wouldn’t let Ember be bashful or shy or crawl under the covers after she’d stripped. The ass.

After guiding her to her feet, he tugged and pulled on her skirt till it fell around her ankles. Her blouse soon followed, though thankfully he didn’t pop the buttons as he’d done to his shirt. Her bra went next and when he was done, she stood there in all her chubby naked glory. Looking down at her saggy boobs, pudgy stomach and dimpled legs, Ember resolved to start a

new diet first thing the next morning. Of course, Paul's opinion of her changed her mind real quick.

"Beautiful. So fucking gorgeous. I'm going to come before I even sink into you. Damn, Em."

It was his sincerity that won her over. Words were just that, *words*. She worked in advertising and knew the power of speech and print. But the look in his eyes proved to her that he meant every single syllable.

Emboldened by his response to her naked body, she closed the distance between them and brushed a soft kiss across his lips. His tongue chased her, but she pulled back before he could deepen the kiss. She took a step toward the bed and without thinking twice, jumped and landed with a bounce in the middle of the mattress.

Giggling, she held her arms out to Paul. "Well, we can't have you ending before things get started. Get over here hot stuff."

*Hot stuff? Gah! I'm an idiot!*

Paul didn't seem to notice.

He pounced on her with a growl, pushing her back against the mattress while he loomed over her. "I'll show you an ending, baby."

Paul caught her lips in a tangle of tongues. Swirling, licking and dipping, they tasted each other while his hands roamed her body. His fingers stroked and pinched her breasts while she moaned into his mouth, urging him on without words. At some point, words weren't needed.

He touched every inch of her. If she moaned, he repeated the caress. If she groaned, he stopped until she whimpered in protest. Again and again he played the game, the whole time stoking her fires higher, hotter, harder. A searing ache formed low in her belly that could only be put out with a massive climax. She figured she had just the man for the job.

When she thought she couldn't take any more tormenting, she begged for what her pussy demanded.

Ember twined her fingers through Paul's hair and yanked his head from her breast. "Fuck me. Fuck me hard and deep, or slow and tender—whatever you want. But fuck me, *now*." She needed to come.

An easy grin broke out on his face and Paul braced himself above her as she breathed a sigh of relief. This was something she knew from other lover's: the fucking position. He shifted his hips, nestling the tip of his cock into the valley of her opening. Her thighs spread for him.

Never before had she wanted to be filled like this. Sure, she'd had sex before, but she had never craved another man inside her like this.

"You ready, Em. Ready for this cock to fill your sweet pussy? Ready to be made love to? To be fucked?"

*Yes, please. All of the above!*

He chuckled and belatedly she realized she'd spoken aloud, again. Before she could get embarrassed for being so damned brazen, Paul entered her. Not slow and sweet, but fierce and hard. In one giant thrust he filled her to near bursting, stretching her rarely used pussy to capacity, almost to the point of pain, but the pure pleasure overrode everything.

She clawed and scratched his forearms while she arched her back; a cry tore from her lips. So good, so hot, and so full.

"Fuck, baby, be still. So fucking tight and hot. Fucking perfect."

*Fucking.* They needed to get to fucking and moving and if he didn't move she'd scream and—

He moved. Withdrawing and then slowly thrusting home again. Like the Fourth of July and New Years all rolled into one, her body was aflame with sensation.

Without words, Paul set a slow, lingering pace of thrust and retreat. The ebb and flow of their lovemaking was tender. Soft pants mingled with softer moans as their bodies continued engaging in the sinuous primal dance.

His cock stroked and petted her inner walls, teasing the special spot within her pussy that made her whole body come alive with tingles of pleasure. The electric shocks of her approaching orgasm danced along her nerves, lighting them on fire. They burned brighter and hotter than the sun itself as they made love.

In and out. In and out. Over and again he stroked his cock into her cunt until she couldn't hold her orgasm at bay any longer. With each thrust, his muscles became more taut beneath her fingertips and she imagined that his own climax was fast approaching.

"Fuck me, Paul. Fuck me hard and make me come. *Please.*" She'd fast learned that he couldn't deny her pleading. As if the one tiny word was all it took for him to lose control, Paul increased his pace to that of a jackhammer. He pounded her pussy in the most delicious way so that, within mere seconds, her climax washed over her like a great tsunami, destroying her and tearing down every wall around her heart that she'd ever built.

Paul tensed and strained above her, panting, groaning, and moaning until he froze, her name on his lips. He jerked as he came, pumping his pulsing cock into her cunt with a few last forceful thrusts until he collapsed over her, his harsh breathing fanning her ear. After a few seconds, he rolled to the side and pulled her with him, tucking her head against his chest.

Yeah, this was the perfect way to say goodbye to her old life and get on with the new.  
Perfect.



## *Chapter Four*

"Fallon and Associates, Mr. Fallon's office, Ember speaking, how can I help you?"

Perfect. *Perfection.*

Okay, it wasn't the perfection she'd been dreaming of two months ago, but a job as Jake Fallon's assistant was a hell of a lot better than working for Claudette, Constance, and Clementine at Ellason Advertising. At least at Fallon and Associates, Jake had told her she'd have a job with the ad squad just as soon as she got her degree. Even now, as his assistant, she sat in on meetings and he coached her on thinking "outside the box" when it came to brainstorming ad campaigns. Jake was considered a bit of an oddball in the advertising world, but Fallon was still a respected agency and Ember thanked God for her job everyday.

Of course, getting the job had taken every bit of determination she had, but she knew it had been worth it. Out from under the evil of her stepmother and stepsisters, she felt better already. And it'd only been two months! She couldn't imagine how much better she'd feel after a year.

"This is Paul. I need to speak with Jake." The gruff voice coming from the phone pulled her from her thoughts and her heart froze in her chest. *Paul.* The name brought back memories, but that voice—that voice threw her into the thick of her most lurid memories of her time with Paul Ashe.

Oh, fuck a duck. It *was* Paul Ashe on the phone. Did he hunt her down? Had he figured out who she was? Oh, shit, was he going to get her fired?

Only through the grace of God and non-disclosure agreements had she secured a job with Jake Fallon. Was Paul calling to try and mess it up in some way? She swallowed past the lump in her throat.

She'd avoided Paul's calls to the Ellason offices after their one night together. Hell, it hadn't even been a full night. They'd slept for a while and Ember woke, still wrapped in Paul's arms. Before he awoke, she gathered her clothes, snuck into the living room, and called a cab. She dressed hastily in his entryway as she kept an eye out the window for her ride. Within minutes,

the car arrived and she dashed through the front door, never to see Paul again. Sure, he'd sent flowers to the office to "Em," but she'd tossed the card and set the roses out for everyone to enjoy. For all the employees knew, Claudette had let a few pennies loose to buy something nice for the office. *Right*. The only one who knew the "big secret" was Marnie.

"I'm sorry, Paul, but Mr. Fallon is in a meeting at the moment. Can I take a message?"

Paul sighed. "Tell Jake I'll be by on Wednesday at two."

Before she could check Jake's schedule or utter a word, Paul was gone and a dial tone sounded through the phone.

Shocked, Ember opened Jake's schedule in Outlook and checked to see if he was available to meet with Paul. Thankfully, he was. Too bad she'd have to be at the office as well. What the hell was she going to do?

Before thinking twice or worrying about her new company's policy regarding personal calls, she called Marnie. Her friend answered it on the first ring like a dutiful little administrative assistant, and Ember didn't let her get through her spiel. "Paul's coming."

"Well, don't you think that's something you two should do in private, or is this something you decided to share with the class?"

Gah! Marnie and her humor. "No, I mean, he's coming to my office. He's coming to see Jake on Wednesday. Shit, Marnie, what am I gonna do?"

Marnie snorted. "You know, I don't know why you don't just call him. He's obviously interested in you. Do you know how many calls I've fielded from that man? How many different ways I've had to tell him that *Em* is busy? I'm telling you, Ember, he's got it bad whether you decide to see it or not."

Ember bit her lip and rolled her eyes. They'd had this conversation before. Many, many times. "There is no way Mr. Paul 'built like a Greek god' Ashe has got *anything* bad..." *Oh my God!* "Shit, Marnie, what if he's got some venereal disease that he wants to warn me about? What... fuck, we didn't use a condom—what if he's got AIDS or something?"

Ember bounced her head on the desk. "Idiot, idiot, idiot..."

"*Ember, you're an idiot!*"

"No, you think? We just got so caught up in the moment and..."

"For the love of... I wasn't talking about not using a condom, though you *are* an idiot and we'll have that conversation separate from this one. I meant you're an idiot if you think some man is going to send you a dozen roses every day for a month because he wants to tell you he's

got VD.” Her best friend sighed. One of those long, drawn out ones and Ember knew she wasn’t done.

“Go ahead. Say it.”

“Dumbass!”

They both broke into a fit of giggles and Ember caught herself before her giggle turned into an all-out laugh. Jake was laid back, but she didn’t want to push her luck when it came to acting up in the office.

“Okay, maybe I’m a bit moronic.”

“Two words, Ember. Dumb. Ass.”

She cleared her throat. The truth hurt. “Anyway, what am I going to do about Wednesday? The man’s been sending flowers this whole time. How do you think he’ll react to seeing me in the flesh, so to speak, after two months? I should call in sick, right? Right. That’s what I’ll do. I don’t have any sick time, but I can still pay the bills if I miss one day. Of course, I haven’t been at this job for long. Should I let him chase me away from my job?

“Ember. Shut it. I don’t know what you’ll do, but we’ll think of something.”

## Chapter Five

Two days later something turned out to be nothing. Not a thing. The whole *best defense is a good offense* idea recommended by Marnie's brother was lost on the two women.

Defense, offense... Ember wondered if there was a *no-fense* option. She didn't want to face Paul. At first, she'd run from embarrassment and fear. In her mind, Paul had been drinking a lot and she didn't want him waking up with her and saying something stupid. Like that she wasn't just ugly, but coyote ugly. Nope, a grisly morning after wasn't Em's idea of fun, so she ran.

Then, after the running was through, she kept on running. Especially when she realized that perhaps Paul Ashe was interested in her. Her! Perfectly plump Ember Ellason. It didn't matter that she'd kinda sorta lied about who she was.

Okay, lots of kinda and no sorta. She lied. That was another reason for not coming clean. Between the chub, the running, and the lies, she figured staying away from Paul Ashe was best. Even if he didn't realize how fortunate he was to *not* have her in his life.

Fortunate. Yeah.

\* \* \* \*

The day finally dawned like any other and Em tromped into work at eight with everyone else. She checked emails, filled coffee mugs, sat in on a few meetings with Jake and basically went about her day as if it were any other. Though she did stay away from food of any kind. Even the yummy yogurt parfait Jake sat on her desk when he sailed through the doors at ten. He was already fifteen minutes late for his meeting. Ember tossed the yogurt into the refrigerator while he met with his department heads. Her stomach just wasn't up to tolerating anything at all.

Two o'clock rolled around and she just couldn't seem to sit still. Instead of sitting at her desk and completing the spreadsheet she'd been working on, she left to walk around the office. She'd become friendly with a few other ladies since she started at Fallon and Associates. Now was as good a time as any to visit. She wasn't avoiding Jake's office because Paul was due to come by. Nope. Nu uh. Not at all.

Just her luck, all of the other admins were too busy to chat. Damn it. Ember weaved back through the cubicles that she lovingly referred to as a Habitrail for overgrown hamsters, and headed back toward her own space. She took the long way, of course.

She checked her watch as she neared her cubicle and was happy to note that it was already fifteen after. Maybe she'd get lucky and Paul would already be in Jake's office.

Ember rounded the last corner, a tiny pep in her step at the prospect of managing to avoid an embarrassing confrontation, when an all-too familiar voice called out to her.

"Em?"

She cringed, shoulders rising nearly to her ears and eyes squeezed shut. Maybe, just maybe, if she kept her eyes closed, she'd turn invisible. It worked for three year olds. Sort of.

"Em, is that you?" The voice drew closer and she knew it was inevitable, might as well face the music.

She opened her eyes a tad, just enough to recognize the shock that quickly turned to anger on Paul's face. Just as she opened her mouth to say... something, Jake interrupted.

"Ember, there you are. I wanted to introduce you to Paul Ashe, but it seems you've already met." Her boss chuckled and it grated against her nerves.

"Ember?" Paul's voice had grown quiet.

She swallowed and nodded, unsure of what to say, how to defend herself. The question was, did she even want to defend herself? Did she want Paul to forgive her for lying and being a coward? Or should she just brush him off? Now that she'd seen him again after being apart for so long, the clenching of her heart at the thought of being separated made the decision for her. She needed to work this out, wanted to work this out, if he did.

"Yes, Ember Ellason," Jake said. "I tell ya, Paul, if you'd given me just one more month, I know that Ember would have blown you away so that you'd look past the whole 'keeping business and friendship' separate thing." Jake smiled at her and she returned it with a half-assed attempt.

"Ellason?" Paul raised his eyebrows. "As in Ellason Advertising? Jesus, Jake, you've got the enemy right under your nose. Add to that the fact that *Em* is a lying, manipulative—"

Ember slapped her hand over his mouth and smiled wide at Jake. "Maybe Paul and I will take this conversation somewhere private, Mr. Fallon."

*Please, let me do this somewhere where the entire office won't hear.*

Jake's gaze shifted between her and Paul before he finally nodded agreement. "Fine, we can discuss this in my office." He turned his attention to Paul. "You've got a lot of hostility toward Em and I just don't understand it, Paul. She's the sweetest and smartest employee I've got at Fallon."

Jake turned from them and walked toward his office. Ember removed her hand from Paul's mouth slowly, half expecting him to bite her, and was surprised when he didn't. Instead, he held out an arm, gesturing for her to precede him. To the casual observer, he appeared to be a gentleman, but Ember knew better. Fire burned in his eyes and she knew that he'd probably like nothing better than if she were to burst into flames.

By the time Jake's door closed, her stomach was in knots and threatening to make an appearance. She swallowed past the rising bile and prayed for her nerves to calm. She'd known this confrontation would happen eventually. And as much as she'd wanted to see Paul again, maybe even spend another night or ten in his arms, she didn't relish the anger focused on her.

Ever the peacemaker, Jake got the ball rolling. "So, what's going on with you two? Paul, you look about ready to kill Ember and she looks near ready to faint. Is somebody going to tell me what the hell's going on?" His voice rose toward the end of his question and she started to doubt the label of "peacemaker" she'd given him.

Both men turned their attention to her and she opened her mouth to speak, but Paul cut her off. "Clementine Eagerton over at Ellason Advertising gave a stunning performance two and a half months ago and I signed with them, as you know. Funny, huh?" Sarcasm dripped from his mouth and he took a step closer. "I couldn't imagine a fire-haired beauty being saddled with the name Clementine, but *Em* seemed to fit her better so that's what I went with. A little dinner, a little slap and tickle and then she disappeared."

Paul's eyes shifted to Jake's. "Imagine my surprise to find her here, working for you, under a different name and trying to pass herself off as Ember Ellason. As if you wouldn't check her out. So, how long has she been here? You've been keeping the little liar busy making coffee, right?" Paul smirked and Ember's heart sunk. The look in his eyes nearly mirrored that of her stepmother's and all hope that Paul would want to explore their relationship died a fiery death.

Jake's brow furrowed and Ember put some distance between her and Paul. "What the fuck are you talking about, man? This *is* Ember Ellason. She worked at Ellason advertising as an administrative assistant before coming here to work for me. Her father left the company to her

stepmother and Em wanted to get out of the 'family' business and make a name for herself somewhere else."

Ember nodded. It was all true. Well, except for the rest of her reason for leaving, but she'd never told Jake that she was afraid of seeing Paul again and dealing with the awkward moment when he discovered her lie.

Paul's attention shot from her to Jake and back again before he finally focused on the ground, shaking his head. "I need a drink and you two need to sit down."

He went to Jake's wet bar without another word and Ember eased closer to Jake. Paul was starting to act a little odd and she didn't want to be in the line of fire without some sort of protection. Jake's body would work.

Paul plopped into a chair and took a sip of his whiskey. "So, you're telling me that you," he pointed a finger at her, "worked as an administrative assistant in your own company and then you quit that job to be an administrative assistant here at Fallon. That this isn't a ploy to learn the inner workings of your competitor."

She nodded. "But it wasn't my company. Daddy left it to Claudette and since I haven't finished my degree—"

"We'll get to that in a minute. If all that's true, then what was us sleeping together all about? Why did you slip out without telling me the truth? Why have you been avoiding me? I've been searching for you for over two months, and I sure as shit know you were still at Ellason the next day, but you hid. What the hell, *Ember*?"

Fire burned her cheeks as they filled with blood, and she imagined her face nearly glowed with embarrassment. "I..." She flicked a glance at Jake, but her boss looked like he wasn't leaving if his life depended on it. "I didn't want you to go back on the deal and harm the business. Afterward, I realized how stupid I acted. Then it was too late and I... I missed you like hell, but I just hid. I'm ashamed of my behavior, but it is what it is." She shrugged.

Paul sat the glass on Jake's desk. "Jake?"

"Yup."

"Get out."

Jake sputtered. "But... But it's my office."

"Not for the next hour, it isn't. Get. Out."

Ember's attention collided with Paul's and she went weak in the knees at the passion she saw burning in his eyes. Passion for her.

Oh. Shit.

“I am not leaving—”

Paul tossed the rest of his drink onto the front of his friend’s shirt. “There, now you need to go home and change. Just get the fuck out, Jake.”

Her boss grumbled, but stalked toward the door. “He’s an ass, Ember. You sure you want to be alone with him?”

She returned her attention to Paul and she nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure.”



## *Chapter Six*

Jake's door closed with a soft click and the echo of the deadbolt locking into place filled the large office. Paul stepped to the windows overlooking the rest of the office suite and closed the blinds, shutting out the curious eyes of the other employees. With the door locked and blinds drawn, they truly were alone.

She licked her suddenly dry lips. "Paul, I shouldn't have run off like that—"

"Shh..." He pressed two fingers to her lips. "Just a few questions."

She nodded.

"You're really Ember Ellason?"

"Yes."

"And you haven't been avoiding me because you didn't want to ever see me again?"

She grabbed his hands and pulled him close, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Oh, no. I was just embarrassed at how I acted and then there was the company to think about and you had been drinking and I didn't want you waking up and thinking 'Gah! Coyote ugly!' and..."

"Em, you're rambling. Coyote ugly?"

"Yeah. I thought you were going to wake up the next morning with me sleeping on your arm and would rather gnaw it off than face dealing with the fat chick you took to bed when you were drunk. Coyote ugly." She smiled. She'd gotten a whole thought out without puking on him.

*Go me!*

He pulled her close. Wrapping his arms around her shoulders, he rested his chin on the top of her head. "What am I going to do with you, huh? I've been searching for you for months and I can't decide between yelling at you, bending you over my knee, or simply fucking you senseless."

She rubbed her cheek against his chest and inhaled his scent. "Do I get a vote?"

"No, you do not get a vote." He slipped one arm from around his waist, but she didn't release him. Soon she had a wad of silk and lace dangling in front of her face. "Do you know I've been carrying these around for two and a half months? Two and a half *months*, Em."

She focused on what was in front of her and realized... “My panties. You’ve been carrying my panties around with you for over two months?” She propped her chin on his chest and looked into his eyes. The fire of anger had long since disappeared, replaced by a hint of desire. “You know, that’s a bit freaky. Almost stalkerish, even.”

“Stalkerish? Nah, I was thinking more along the lines of Cinderella. You know, silk panties, glass slipper, same difference.”

She laughed out loud at his reasoning. “So, have you been slipping my panties onto women anxious to take on the Ashe name? I see how it is...”

He softly kissed her lips. “Never.” He shrugged. “Just... You’ve been on my mind a lot and having them near meant I had a part of you with me. At least until I could find you.”

“Stalker. You would never have found me if you hadn’t come to visit Jake. Hell, you didn’t even recognize my voice when you scheduled the meeting.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He kissed her again. “And for the record, I was going to ask Jake for the name of a good private eye.” He kissed her nose. “I was going to find you.” He kissed her forehead. “If it cost me every cent I had.” He nuzzled the spot beneath her ear. “And now that I’ve found you, I won’t let you go. Especially since we’ll have a long battle ahead of us.”

Confused, she pushed him back to put space between them. “Battle? Why?”

“Cause, baby, you own Ellason Advertising whether you know it or not.”

Her knees went weak and this time, she really did fall to the floor with his words. Paul went down with her and pulled her into his lap. “Em?”

She couldn’t find her voice. She *owned* Ellason Advertising? “Are you... are you sure?”

He nodded, concern marring his features. “Yes, I did research on your company before I scheduled the meeting. I like to know the people I’m really doing business with. Em, without a doubt, you own Ellason. Your father left the company to you.”

“But Claudette said—”

“She lied. Didn’t you speak with any lawyers after your father’s death?”

Ember thought of the time surrounding her father’s passing and couldn’t remember whom she’d spoken with. So many different attorneys and bankers and God knew who else had come to their home, and she’d only ever wanted them gone.

“I don’t know. I just went along with what Claudette told me and carried on with my life as best as I could. I didn’t think. *Gah!* I’m such an idiot.” She buried her head in her hands, tears burning her eyes. “What now?”

"Now, you swear to me that you'll never run off again." He squeezed her tight as if in a threat. "And we'll get your company away from that woman and live happily ever after."

"Happily ever after?"

"Yup."

"But that only happens in fairytales."

"Hey, we've already established the Cinderella connection here. I've got the panties that prove you belong to me. You're not going to argue with the panties, are you?"

"Nope."

*The End*

## *About the Author*

Celia would have loved to have written her own biography, but she just didn't know what to say. In a fit of desperation, she turned to me, her most trusted confidant and friend. I realize you're asking yourself, "Who is this?" I am Cali, her cat. I also go by a few other names, but those may be too strong for your delicate ears. Suffice it to say my mommy is very creative and not just with writing.

My mommy, Celia, began writing in August of 2006. I know this because it was around that time our meals started coming later and later in the day. As months passed, she spent more and more time in front of the boring screen. Though, it was fun to chase the little arrow around every once in a while. You should hear her scream! But I digress.

She's worked hard to give readers sexy, quirky heroines they can relate to. And you better damn well appreciate it. All I got was late night feedings. And I didn't even make it into one of her books by name! That damn kitten, Katie O'Meghan, did. Bitch.

Well, enjoy her writings and if you want to praise her for her work... don't. I'd like to get fed at some point, people.

Fine. If you must contact her, her website is at [www.celiakyle.com](http://www.celiakyle.com) or you can send an email to [celia.kyle@gmail.com](mailto:celia.kyle@gmail.com). But when I go hungry, I'll blame you all!

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They tell me that I am special, that my ability to heal is a “gift” that should be treasured and appreciated. As far as I’m concerned, I’m not gifted...I’m cursed. Nothing in this life is free, not even gifts. There is always a price to be paid somewhere, somehow.

My healing gift came with twelve Rules of Darkness, rules that I must follow at all times, until the day I die. The rules are ingrained in who I am. They dictate how I live my life when I am awake, and they haunt me when I’m asleep. *Don't look into a graveyard, Katia. Don't touch the dead, Katia. Never seek out the lost, Katia...*It's enough to drive a person mad.

And perhaps that's where I find myself now. A victim of a disease I can cure in others, but not in myself. It's madness to break the rules, and yet, I don't care anymore. I'm tired of living my life this way. I'm tired of the rules. I won't do it any more, and if that means I suffer the consequences, then so be it.

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