

K I M A N I R O M A N C E



*Power
Play*

DARA
GIRARD

“I have a theory that you should never stop living until you’re dead.”

His hand skimmed down to her hip, and she felt a trembled thrill run through her, escalating as he descended. She felt as though he’d removed her dress to reveal the stockings she wore underneath. “And you’re certainly not dead.”

She drew back, struggling to tame the warmth that gathered between her legs, responding to his masculine scent and expert hands. “I’d better go.”

He lowered his voice to a tone that shouldn’t have been heard in a crush of people and with the noise of the live band, but its soft power made every other sound fade away, and his velvet tone was all she heard when he spoke. “I think it’s time you stop running away from me.” He lowered his head and whispered, “You can’t deny what we feel for each other.”

DARA GIRARD

is an award-winning author of both fiction and nonfiction books. Her love of writing started at a young age. After graduating from college, she decided to write full-time. She enjoys writing romance, because of the range it provides, from comedy to suspense. Her novels are known for their humor, interesting plot twists and witty dialogue.

*Power
Play*

DARA
GIRARD



To my family and loyal readers
who continue to believe in me.

Dear Reader,

I love writing fairy-tale stories, so it is with great pleasure that I bring you *Power Play*, the premiere book in my first miniseries, THE BLACK STOCKINGS SOCIETY, for Harlequin Kimani Romance. This invitation-only society is for women who have been unlucky in love and are ready to change their lives.

And that definitely describes Mary Reyland, a mousy, unassuming woman who gets an invitation and jumps at the chance to find her Prince Charming. However, she's certain he's not Edmund Davis, a wealthy entrepreneur. Edmund disagrees, and sets out to seduce her with his sexy eyes and killer charm. But instead this little lamb turns the table on this big, bad wolf.

I hope you find Mary and Edmund's story as fun, sexy and heartwarming as I do. If you'd like to learn about my other titles, please visit my Web site at www.daragirard.com.

Enjoy,

Dara Girard

Chapter 1

“I want her.”

James Richardson stared at his friend, amazed.
“Are you sure?”

It was a silly question. Edmund Davis was always sure of what he wanted, and right now his vision was locked on a rather nondescript woman getting a drink from the water cooler.

He nodded and continued to stare at the female figure through James’s large indoor office window.
“Yes, I want her.”

“Mary Reyland?” James asked, surprised. She

wasn't the type of woman that usually caught anyone's attention, much less a man's interest. Definitely not a man like Edmund Davis, who had women slipping their phone numbers into his pockets whenever they had a chance. He could have his choice of women—why had Mary caught his eye? Not that there was anything wrong with her, James thought, trying to be kind. But there wasn't much right about her, either. She had a nice face, but there was nothing remarkable about it. She wasn't fashionably slim or pleasantly plump; her figure could be described as thick, just like the sensible shoes she wore, which looked like they'd been ordered from an orthopedic catalog that offered them in only brown or black. Mary always kept her hair pulled back in a tight bun, and in her ill-fitting gray suit, her brown skin looked slightly chalky instead of warm. She could easily blend in with the office wall panel. No, James couldn't imagine how Mary had caught Davis's attention.

James tried to adjust his view. He glanced around the office to see if there was some other woman Davis had been referring to, but he saw only a teenage delivery girl wearing a tight, low-cut white T-shirt with a large pizza logo on it. "You're talking about Mary Reyland?" James

asked again, just to make sure. At that moment Mary took a sip of her drink, accidentally spilling a little on the front of her blouse. She attempted to brush it away, only making the wet stain spread. James shook his head. Davis had to be talking about someone else.

“Yes,” Davis said. “I want her to supervise my project.”

“*Your* project?”

Davis’s tone became impatient. “I mean my investment, The New Day Senior Living Community.”

James stiffened as the reason for Davis’s unexpected visit to his office became clear. His words burst forth in a rush. “I can’t promise—”

“Of course you can,” Davis said with a quiet conviction that left no room for argument. He hadn’t taken his gaze from Mary, and for a moment James felt sorry for her. She didn’t stand a chance. If Davis wanted her, he would get her. “There are no problems. You can manage this. I want her.” His steely grayish-brown eyes moved from Mary and pinned on James. “Make it happen.”

“But I—” James stammered.

Davis turned from the window and sat. Although he appeared more relaxed seated, James knew it was a ploy. Davis was a tall man who

never used his height to intimidate others; he let his eyes do that. He could impale someone with just a glance. James felt as though his tie was slowly strangling him. He tugged on it. Davis could be a mean SOB when he wanted to. Especially when someone tried to stand in the way of something he wanted. James didn't want to be that individual, but he had to think of Mary. "But what?" Davis asked, his tone casual. James knew it was not.

"I don't think I can," he said in a great rush. When he saw Davis narrow his gaze, he quickly added, "But there are others who—"

Davis shook his head. "No." He spoke the words calmly and coolly. So coolly James wanted to reach for the antacid pills he had in his top desk drawer.

James forced a smile, trying to lighten the mood. "Davis, be reasonable. Your project isn't that complicated, and there are some very talented people who can supervise it."

Davis didn't remove his gaze and his voice remained neutral. "I don't want anyone else."

James inwardly shivered despite the warm spring day. He glanced helplessly at the woman who had caught Davis's attention. She was now

talking to two other women, both more attractive.
“Why Mary?”

Davis merely blinked. He didn’t reply; he knew James already knew the answer and he didn’t waste time stating the obvious: Mary was a push-over. She wouldn’t get in his way or in the way of the program manager—Gregory Trent. She was someone Davis could control. He liked to be in control. And James knew there was no way he could convince him to use someone else. Davis didn’t change his mind easily.

“You owe me.”

“But I—”

“Need I remind you about—”

“No,” James interrupted, not even wanting to hear her name. The last person he’d assigned to the senior community project had been a disaster. That particular individual, a stately, middle-aged woman, had been overzealous, making the two-year grant Trent had been awarded a personal nightmare. Because Davis had invested a considerable sum of money in the project, he kept a close eye on how things had been progressing and wasn’t happy.

James dropped his shoulders, feeling the weight of his defeat. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Davis smiled. The expression didn’t warm his

eyes. "I thought so." He stood. "Gregory's schedule is free in two weeks. She can see him then." He opened the door and left.

James watched him go, then returned his gaze to Mary. Poor Mary. She wasn't going to like this. Today she was supposed to receive a promotion. In her new position she wouldn't be overseeing any projects. But James didn't want to get on Davis's bad side. He was a powerful man with key contacts and could make James's life miserable if he wanted to.

Perhaps Mary wouldn't be *too* disappointed, James thought, trying to justify his actions. She didn't appear to be that ambitious, and she was good at what she did. Besides, she might be flattered that someone had specifically requested her. She could always get promoted next year. James shoved his hands in his pockets, feeling somewhat better. He lifted the phone and dialed his secretary. "Tell Mary I want to see her."

"Who?"

"Edmund Davis," James repeated.

Mary looked at him blankly. This conversation was all wrong. All day, she'd been imagining what was supposed to happen. And this wasn't it. She'd

imagined that James would ask her into his office and say, “*Mary you’ve been a wonderful employee and that’s why I’m giving you the program director’s position.*” Instead, he was talking about some project dealing with the elderly, the man who ran it and the primary investor who wanted her to work on it. After many years and numerous hints, the program director position should be hers. That’s what they were *supposed* to be discussing.

Five years. She’d been passed over for *five years*. Five long years of exemplary work, but James wasn’t talking about that. There was no mention of her excellent record, her devotion, or her years of service. Mary’s heart fell. She should have known better the moment she’d stepped into the office and James had started smiling at her. He always delivered bad news with a smile, and he was very good at delivering it. She was certain he’d gotten his job because he did that so well. He had a handsome baby face that one couldn’t reproach and a nice, soothing voice. But for once in her life Mary felt like slapping him across the face with her handbag. Instead, she wrapped her hands around the strap until her palms burned.

“He wants you to work on this project,” James

continued in a voice that was supposed to lessen her disappointment. It didn't. "And I think it will be a great opportunity for you."

"Why?"

James hesitated. Obviously he wasn't prepared for that question. That surprised her. He was usually very prepared. He cleared his throat, then tugged on the cuffs of his jacket as though his sleeves were suddenly shrinking. "Because—" he tugged some more "—because you'll be able to use all your skills. Davis has a very exciting project."

Mary lifted an eyebrow. "I thought you said he's invested in a nursing home."

James wagged his finger. "A senior community."

"And that's supposed to be exciting?"

"He's on the cutting edge of a revolutionary concept. No longer will seniors be shuttled away to die. The community he's created is like a new world."

"I don't believe this," Mary muttered, shaking her head.

But James didn't hear her or didn't care to hear any more of her complaints and continued to talk about what a wonderful opportunity it would be for her career. Mary blocked him out. The words didn't matter. It was just more of the same. Another reason why she would stay in the same position, in the

same office, doing the same thing. Another reason why someone else would get a job that should have been hers. And every time James passed her over he talked to her as though he were doing her a favor. And every time, she wanted to tell him where he and his favor could go but never did.

Mary thought of the bottle of champagne she'd bought. It sat chilling in her refrigerator at home. She had planned to celebrate. She'd been certain this was going to be her year. Her year to finally have an office with a view and more administrative power. She'd have money to fix her car and could afford to pay for special services for her elderly friend, Mrs. McQueeth. One of the services she'd hoped to get started right away was to have food delivered to her friend and someone to check on her once, or possibly twice, a week. But this wasn't her year. Instead she was going to supervise yet another community-based project. To make matters worse, this one catered to seniors rich enough to spend their golden years in a swanky community with lots of luxurious amenities and frivolous services.

"Mary?"

She blinked. James's concerned face came into focus. "Yes?"

“I’m finished.”

“Okay.”

“You’ll meet with Mr. Gregory Trent in two weeks. His schedule is booked until then.”

“Did Mr. Davis say why he chose me specifically?”

“He’s heard good things about you and wanted the best to work with Mr. Trent.”

“He said that?”

“Yes.”

Not only was James spineless, he was a terrible liar. He had a telling habit of rubbing his thumb and forefinger together when he lied—he could have caused a fire from the friction he was generating now. “I see,” she said.

He smiled. “I’m so glad we had this chat. He’s an important person.”

“That you wouldn’t want to make unhappy,” she mumbled.

“And I’m glad you’ll be on this project to make us both look good.”

She stared at him, for the first time realizing how much she disliked him, then forced a smile that mirrored his. “That’s my job.” *And at this rate it doesn’t look like that will ever change.*

As she exited James’s office, his secretary, Jean

Franks, a middle-aged woman with a cloud of red curls and a face full of freckles, looked up from her computer. "Well?"

"I'm taking an early lunch," Mary said in a flat voice.

Jean frowned. "You didn't get the promotion?"

"No."

She glanced at James's office door, confused. "But—"

"I'll see you later," Mary said, then quickly left before Jean could say more. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want a repeat of the past several years, having to endure the pitying glances and the but-it-should-have-been-you statements. She was tired of it all. Tired of being the sensible one when she wanted to grab James by the collar and say, "*Give me the promotion you bastard or I quit.*" But she couldn't quit. She'd worked hard just to get as far as she had, and she couldn't let one moment of anger throw that all away.

Right then all she could think of was leaving the building as fast as possible and driving somewhere to be alone. She reached the elevator but not before Dianne Sallis cornered her. She was the *last* person Mary wanted to see. Not that there was anything wrong with her. She was Mary's complete oppo-

site: perfect in every way. A very attractive woman with skin that resembled espresso, flowing dark hair, impeccably groomed and on speaking terms with Lady Luck.

Mary had trained Dianne two years ago and watched her use her abundant energy, youthful enthusiasm and cunning to rise to a position that had taken Mary twice as long to reach. But Dianne had a gift of pleasing the right people and of being a chameleon. She knew the appropriate way to behave in any situation. Right now she wore an expression of sadness. It didn't seem genuine, but nothing about Dianne did. "I am so sorry. I just heard."

How could she have just heard? Was she listening by the door? Did Jean send everyone an e-mail blast?

"That promotion should have been yours. Everybody knows that."

"Thank you."

"Anyone who takes that promotion should be ashamed of themselves. They should consider themselves a thief."

"You're very kind." *Now go away.*

"I don't know how you can be so calm." She rested a hand on her chest. "I would be devastated.

Absolutely *devastated*. Not to mention humiliated. I mean to be passed over *five* times.”

Mary moved around Dianne and pushed the down button.

“You know James is a jerk. This is so unfair. You should do something about it. I know I would.”

Mary pushed the button again, trying to will the elevator to arrive. *I wish you'd just go away.*

“Where are you going now?”

I don't know. “Run errands.”

“Do you need any company?”

Definitely not. “I'll be fine, thank you.”

At last the elevator arrived and Mary hurried inside, hoping Dianne wouldn't change her mind and decide to follow. “I'll call you later,” Dianne said, waving as the doors closed.

Mary forced a smile that made her cheeks ache. *Please don't.* “Okay.” When the doors closed, Mary shut her eyes and sagged against the wall. Not only did she feel humiliated, she felt old.

“You don't like her, do you?” a deep voice said.

Mary jumped, startled, and gaped at the man who had spoken. He was the only other person in the elevator. She'd been so busy paying attention to escaping Dianne, she hadn't noticed him. Looking at him now, she wasn't sure how she could

have. The sheer size of him was hard to miss. He looked like he could kick a boulder with little effort. But then again he didn't look like the outdoors type. His handsome face seemed more suited for winking at a woman across an elegant ballroom and making her blush.

He certainly dressed the part of a sophisticated stranger. His classically cut maroon jacket added warmth to his brown skin, although Mary doubted anything could warm his eyes. They were more gray than brown and reminded her of a snowy winter she'd spent in Colorado. He looked like the type of man who would ask for a number and never call.

When he continued to look at her, Mary realized she was staring and tried frantically to remember what it was he'd asked her. *Dianne*, he'd asked her about Dianne. "Oh, no, it's not that. I'm just tired."

The man nodded, but it was clear he didn't believe her. She didn't blame him. She was as bad a liar as James. She glanced down at her shoes so she wouldn't start staring at him again. It was likely that he was used to it, but she didn't want to be one of many. Right now she had other things to consider. At least he was someone she didn't know. Someone who wouldn't take the time to rub her

face in her humiliation. She bet he never got passed over for a promotion.

He, like Dianne, was probably close friends with Lady Luck. Looking at his expensive suit, there was no doubt he was likely in bed with Ms. Luck and keeping her very happy. He and Dianne would make a perfect pair. Mary repressed a sigh. She'd never been lucky. A knot built up in her throat, and she could feel the burning of tears behind her eyes. She took a deep breath and kept them at bay. "*These things happen,*" her mother used to say when she lost the lead in the school play, when she wasn't invited to a party or when no one asked her out. "*It's just your luck,*" her mother had always reminded her. She wouldn't feel sorry for herself, she'd deal with the disappointment the way she always had, with resignation.

Mary wondered what her new project manager looked like. Did he wear a bow tie and whine a lot? She hated working with project managers who whined. And why on earth did his investor have to request her specifically? What was his name again? Davis? No, that was his last name. Edward? Eric? Elliot? No, something that sounded old and boring. Edmund? Yes, that was right.

"Edmund," she muttered in disgust.

“What?” the man asked.

She jumped. Although his voice was soft, his resonant deep tone startled her. “I just said *Edmund*.”

“Why?”

Because I sometimes talk to myself. She shrugged. “I was just thinking about names.” He nodded and continued to look at her in a way that encouraged her to talk. “I thought my name, *Mary*, was a boring name, but *Edmund* is worse.”

He frowned. “I don’t think so. Actually, I—”

“Have you ever read of a hero named Edmund?”

“Edmond Dantès.”

“Who?”

“The Count of Monte Cristo.”

“Oh yes, him. Except his name was spelled with an *o* not a *u*.”

“Close enough.”

“And he was an anti-hero.”

“A hero,” the man corrected.

“He was consumed with revenge.”

He tilted his head to the side and flashed a slow smile. “Do you have something against vengeance?”

Mary stopped, feeling her mouth go dry. This man was dangerous. He made vengeance sound tempting and could probably make other bad things sound tempting, too. And his smile could

convince a fish to live on dry land. Mary folded her arms as though that could offer a shield against his charms. "I think it's wrong."

His gaze dipped to her folded arms, then back to her face. "That depends on how it's done," he said softly.

She couldn't breathe. She'd never been claustrophobic, but suddenly the elevator felt too small. Who was this man? He'd seemed so ordinary before, but not now. Especially when he talked about vengeance. He had the eyes for it. She pitied anyone who crossed him. He seemed a man of his word. Not wishy-washy like her boss or her boyfriend, Curtis, who'd been promising to marry her for the past eight years. No, he was no ordinary man and she'd somehow caught his full attention and couldn't redirect it. She glanced to see what floor they were on and sighed with relief. The ground floor would arrive soon.

"Well?" the man said.

She shifted awkwardly, uncomfortable under his gaze. Men rarely looked at her with such intensity. Even in high school and college she'd only caught a boy's interest when he wanted to copy her notes from class. "I don't think vengeance helps anyone."

He leaned toward her in disbelief. "Really?"

She could only nod, scared that if she moved she'd touch him and like it.

"So you've never wanted revenge?"

"The thought has crossed my mind," she admitted. "But I'd never do it," she added when he began to smile. She didn't trust his smile. It was too knowing. She shook her head.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. A young man started to come in, then someone called his name. He held the doors open while he chatted with a young woman.

"I don't usually find conversations with strangers amusing," Mary said.

"Then how do you make friends?"

Mary opened her mouth to reply, but the tall stranger held up a hand, then said in an ominous tone, "Are you coming in or not?"

The young man spun around so quickly he lost his balance and stumbled out of the elevator. He gave them a bewildered look as the door closed. "Good decision."

Mary covered her mouth to hide a giggle, remembering the young man's face. "You frightened him." She quickly adjusted her features, determined to give him a sound scolding. "That wasn't very nice."

“No,” he said, but didn’t appear sorry. The elevator stopped on another floor. A young woman entered and smiled, giving the stranger an inviting glance. He smiled back. Mary stared down at her shoes, ready to disappear.

“Now about Edmund,” he said.

Mary glanced up, surprised. “We’re back to him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” she asked, flattered that he still wished to talk to her but also confused. Mary caught the look of the other woman, which said “*you lucky girl.*” She felt her pulse quicken.

“I’m curious why you don’t like him.”

She sighed, feeling foolish. “I shouldn’t really. It’s not his fault that he ruined things for me.”

The man looked alarmed. “Ruined what things?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Doesn’t matter. The damage is done. I dislike the man and I haven’t even met him, which isn’t fair. He’s probably an overworked, underfunded project manager with a bald spot and a lisp.”

“Why a lisp?”

“I think lisps are endearing.” She shook her head. “Wait. That would be Gregory. I’m not working with Edmund directly. Edmund is probably a chain-smoking workaholic who develops ulcers.”

“Oh.” The stranger’s expression changed. He looked so distraught—as though he were a child told that his birthday would never come—she liked him even more. Someone was genuinely on her side. “It really doesn’t matter.”

“Perhaps if you told him what he’s done he could—”

“No, he’s not the type to care about anyone but himself.”

“How do you know that?”

“Men who make demands like that rarely care who gets in their way. He’s probably extraordinarily rich and extraordinarily busy. What’s going on in my life won’t mean anything to him. Fortunately, I don’t have to meet him. I’ll handle it.” The stranger looked ready to argue, but thankfully they reached the ground floor and Mary dashed out. He followed her.

“How are you going to handle it?” he asked, trying to sound casual, but the words came out as a demand.

“I don’t know. Somehow.” Mary walked outside and squinted at the bright sunlight. The stranger put on his sunglasses. “I’m not really worried about me, it’s Mrs. McQueeth.”

“Who?”

“My neighbor. She needs quality care and I was going to—” She stopped. “It’s eerie.”

“What?”

“How easy you are to talk to. I don’t know how you do it, but I find myself telling you things I should keep to myself.”

“Why should you keep them to yourself?”

“Because I don’t know you. I shouldn’t be telling you all this.”

“Why not? You looked like someone who needed to vent. Don’t you feel better?”

Mary thought for a moment. Oddly, yes. The heavy feeling weighing on her heart had lifted. He hadn’t pitied or patronized her. He felt her pain but didn’t blow it out of proportion or ignore it. He was a nice man—no matter how cold his eyes looked. She smiled at him. “Yes, I do. See? I didn’t even need revenge.”

“Hmm. Let’s hope you remember that.”

Mary held out her hand because she knew she had to say goodbye, but she didn’t want to. She noticed he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, but it didn’t matter because she had Curtis and she was happy with him. And even if she had been single, just because he was nice to her didn’t mean he’d ever think of her as a romantic possibility. When he clasped her hand in his

she nearly melted but managed to keep her voice steady when she spoke. "Thank you for listening. I hope you have a lucky day."

"You, too."

"Thanks." She took a step back and her heel got caught in a grate and snapped off. "Oh, damn."

He rushed to her side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She bent to retrieve the broken heel, desperate to create distance between them. "I suppose I have no right to offer people luck when I have none of my own."

He took the heel from her. "Give me your shoe," he said as he opened his briefcase.

Curious, Mary handed him her shoe and watched in amazement as he superglued her heel back on. "You've done this before," she said.

He tugged on the heel to make sure it was solid, then knelt down and slipped the shoe on her foot. For a moment his hand cradled her ankle and the soft caress of his fingers made her skin tingle; then he stood and snapped his briefcase closed. "I can promise you one thing, Mary. Your luck is about to change."

Mary began to reply to his odd statement, but he suddenly turned and walked away.

Mary started to call out to him, then stopped,

disappointed she hadn't discovered his name. It didn't matter. She'd never see him again.

Surprisingly, the stranger in the elevator had made her feel better. He'd said her luck would change, and for some unknown reason she believed him. She could believe anything he said. He seemed like an honest man. Now in good spirits, Mary treated herself to a long lunch and walked around an open-air farmer's market. She returned to her office renewed. But the feeling didn't last long. The moment she entered the office the wave of pity that met her nearly drowned her. "I'm so sorry," people said when they saw her. "Good ole Mary," they whispered. "Such a good sport, so understanding." By five o'clock, she nearly broke into a sprint in her determination to leave. She just wanted to lock herself in her apartment. Curtis would be there, and together they would talk about how much she deserved the promotion, just as they had every year. Except, when she returned to her apartment that evening, Curtis and most of her things were gone.

Chapter 2

At first Mary thought she'd been robbed. A gang of thieves must have broken into her seventh-floor apartment and stolen all the furniture. But then burglars didn't usually leave yellow Post-it notes behind. She dashed over to the counter and yanked off the note. It read: *Don't freak. I just took what was mine. Curtis*

Mary read the note three times before it registered. He'd left her and taken everything with him. He'd just "taken what was his." She crumpled up the note and looked around the bare apartment.

Nearly everything was gone. Her mother was going to love hearing what had happened. She'd warned Mary not to depend on, much less trust, a man. "He's good-looking and rich," she used to say. "He doesn't need you and can leave at any time."

Kate Reyland knew from experience. Her marriage of twenty years fell apart after her husband fell in love with another woman. Another woman who looked very similar to her but was ten pounds heavier.

How long had Curtis been planning this? She hadn't had a clue that anything was wrong. There weren't long nights at the office, strange phone calls or lipstick on his shirts. Nothing to give her a hint. He'd even wished her good luck that morning. She hadn't realized he was saying goodbye. Mary glanced at the cage in the corner. At least he'd left her pet iguana, Cammie. The two had never gotten along. Curtis hadn't liked all the care Mary had had to give her pet and preferred to keep Cammie in the cage even though she loved to roam.

Mary took her out and set her down. "Now you can run around in the day as well as at night. Curtis is gone." The words hit her like an anvil. She crumpled to the floor and stared up at the ceiling. She'd lost it all. She'd lost her promotion, her boyfriend

and nearly all of her belongings—all in one day. Cammie crawled up on her stomach and Mary stroked her. “It’s just you and me now. I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

At that moment, the phone rang.

She didn’t move at first, then imagined all the people who could be calling and their possible reasons. She thought of Mrs. McQueeth. Perhaps she was trying to reach her because she needed something. Mary set Cammie down, then raced to the phone. Dianne’s cheery voice came over the line.

“I just got promoted,” she said.

Mary fell against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. “Oh?” she said in a neutral tone, wondering if Dianne could hear the echo in the background.

Dianne’s voice changed to regret and sorrow, like an actor remembering what emotions to play in a scene. “I feel *so* bad. It should have been you.”

Mary waited, hoping Dianne would take the hint and hang up. She didn’t.

“I agonized all day about what I should do. When James called me into his office, at first I was going to tell him what I really thought of him, then he offered me the promotion and I was shocked. Stunned. Absolutely *stunned*. We both know you deserve it, but...since you didn’t get it I thought

it's an opportunity I can't let go. You're not mad at me are you?"

Does it matter? "I'd better go."

"Mary, tell me you're not mad, please. I'd feel just awful if I thought you were mad at me. I mean, you do understand that it's a great opportunity and I may not get another one, but I'd hate to know you were mad."

Mary gripped the phone. "I'm not mad."

"Oh, good. That makes me feel so much better. Now—"

"I really have to go." She watched Cammie slowly crawl across the empty floor. "Congratulations on your promotion."

"Thanks, Mary, that means a lot to me."

"Right." Mary hung up the phone and took a deep breath. She drew her knees to her chest. "I'm not going to feel sorry for myself. At least I have my health and I can get new furniture. Things will work out. I'll finally be able to decorate this place the way I want to." Curtis had never let her decide on anything.

Mary thought for a moment. She could still celebrate. She was starting anew. This was the beginning of her new life. The stranger in the elevator had said her luck would change. With renewed

confidence Mary got up and went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. She gasped, her heart twisting with pain. There were leftovers from last night's dinner, vegetables and various juices, but the champagne was gone. That's when Mary burst into tears.

"So did you get her?" Gregory Trent asked Edmund when Edmund visited him at his office.

Edmund sent him a stern look and sat at his desk. With his frequent visits to Gregory's office, both had decided he needed one. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

"Right. Sorry, I forgot who I was talking to. I knew you would. This is perfect. Now we're all set." He rubbed his hands together. "No one will interfere with how I do things."

Edmund sat back in his chair unable to share his friend's enthusiasm. He had left Richardson's office pleased, only to return moments later annoyed after having run in to Mary in the elevator. He couldn't erase that meeting from his mind, and remembered it now.

"You forgot to tell me something," he'd said to Richardson as he settled into a chair.

Richardson had looked up at him, confused. “I don’t understand.”

“That makes two of us. I had an interesting conversation with Mary Reyland a few moments ago, and she accused me of ruining things for her.”

Richardson widened his eyes. “She said that to your face? That doesn’t sound like her.”

“She didn’t say it to me directly,” Edmund said impatiently. “But she was referring to me. She didn’t know it was me she was talking about.”

“Oh.”

“So how have I ruined things for her?”

Richardson sighed. “She was up for a promotion.”

“And?”

“And I couldn’t give her the promotion because you wanted her to manage your project.”

Edmund pounded the arm of his chair. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You wouldn’t let me—”

“That would have changed things.”

“I tried to tell you, but—”

Edmund pushed himself up from the chair and stood at the window. “We could have come up with an arrangement.” He looked directly at Rich-

ardson. "You really should learn to speak up more."

"But I—"

"Fortunately, this can be fixed." Edmund returned to his seat. "You can give her the promotion after she finishes my project."

Richardson stared at him, speechless.

"What's wrong now?"

"I can't."

Edmund narrowed his gaze. "Can't or won't?"

Richardson squirmed in his seat. "It's impossible."

"Why?"

"I already gave it to another employee, Dianne Sallis."

"Why?"

"Because she's the next in line."

"Couldn't you have waited?"

"I had to make a decision today or I would have lost the funding for that position." Richardson shrugged helplessly. "What's done is done. Mary won't be upset."

Edmund frowned and then stood. "She looked upset to me."

"She'll get over it. She always does."

He stopped at the door. "What do you mean she *always* does?" he asked without looking back.

Richardson cleared his throat. "Well, she's sort of been waiting for this."

Edmund slowly turned around. "How long?"

Richardson lowered his gaze and mumbled something.

"Speak up."

"I said five years."

"Five years?"

Richardson nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me? I would never have done this if I'd known. The poor, little thing."

Richardson stifled a laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, Mary's not exactly little."

"She's little to me," he replied in a quiet voice that had dared Richardson to argue.

Richardson quickly nodded in agreement, but looked as though he'd just stepped into dog mess.

"You should have stood up for her."

"Against you?" he sputtered.

"Against anyone who would hurt her."

Richardson shook his head, confused. "You've got Mary all wrong. She's a real trooper. You should have seen her in my office. She was fine.

Not a tear or a frown. No emotion at all. She took the news the way she always does—like a professional.”

But Edmund knew Richardson was wrong. The woman he met on the elevator had looked near tears and he was the reason.

Edmund now looked at Gregory and drummed his fingers on his desk. He’d gotten what he’d wanted, and somehow he knew he’d need to make sure she’d get what she wanted. But the thought still didn’t make things right. He hadn’t meant for Mary to lose her promotion. However, he’d make it up to her. He had to. Once she finished his project, he’d make sure she’d get her promotion.

But Mary’s unfortunate situation didn’t bother him the most. What bothered him more was her description of him. Or rather her invisible Edmund—the chain-smoking workaholic who didn’t care about others. Number one, he didn’t smoke. He’d tried in high school and had been so sick he’d never tried again. Number two, yes, he liked to work, but within reason. Okay, so he did put in more hours than most people but only because he wanted to. Number three, he *did* care about people. He wasn’t in the habit of running over people to get his own

way; he preferred to use the word *persuasive*. And he could be *very* persuasive.

Besides, after the horrendous experience with the previous supervisor, they needed someone totally different. He knew that Gregory would be able to handle Mary. Edmund was pleased to have gotten a chance to talk to her. She would be very easy to manipulate...no, to work with. He'd made the right decision. Gregory didn't need any hassles.

The newly designed senior community Gregory and he had envisioned was his life—his heart, if he were to be completely honest—and he wanted it to work. There were a lot of people ready to see them fail, but Edmund couldn't afford to. He'd lose almost everything if he did.

"Oh, by the way," Gregory said with a slight smile, "Wanda called. She said she couldn't reach you."

Edmund stared at him. "I thought I broke up with her."

"No, you were going to do that today."

He softly swore. Instead of calling her, he'd gone back to Richardson's office. "I forgot."

"That's not like you."

No, it wasn't, but the incident with Mary had distracted him. He wouldn't let that happen again.

"I guess I'll have to do that tomorrow." He frowned. "Did she say why she called?"

"No, only that she wanted you to call her back."

Edmund glanced at his watch, then lifted the phone; Wanda picked up on the third ring. "Hi," he said.

"Hi, Edmund. We need to talk."

He hated those words; they were never good. "Fine. Tomorrow. I'll reserve a table at the—"

"No, we need to talk today."

"Fine. Talk."

"Can you come over after work?"

"Sure." He hung up.

Gregory looked at him expectantly. "What did she want?"

"She wants to talk to me."

Gregory gave a low whistle. "That can't be good."

Four hours later, Edmund found out how bad it was as he sat in Wanda's apartment while she tearfully told him that she'd fallen in love with someone else. He didn't think it was a good time to burst into laughter. He'd been trying to figure out a nice way to break up with her for the past three weeks.

He patted her hand. "It's okay."

"I didn't mean for this to happen."

“That’s all right. It wasn’t working between us anyway.” It had been a disaster. He’d met her at a charity function and had initially found her attractive and entertaining, but she had soon made him regret giving her his number. She’d called him all the time. At first he’d thought it was cute; then the calls had increased from every day to every few hours. She’d wanted to know what he was doing, where he was going and with whom. He soon felt he was being stalked and had started lying. Now he was free again. He struggled not to whoop with joy.

Her wet eyes immediately dried up. “You mean you don’t care?”

He stiffened. Dammit, he’d said the wrong thing but didn’t know what. He felt like he’d just fallen into a hole he’d dug himself. “I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s how you feel.”

“How can you know how I feel?”

She pulled her hand from his. “That’s the problem—I never did.” She rested a hand on his shoulder and shook her head in regret. “Edmund, you’re not normal.”

He drew back. *He* wasn’t normal? The woman who had three psychiatrists telling her the various ways to blame her parents for her separation issues was telling him *he* wasn’t normal? Perhaps she

was right—what normal man would date a woman like her for six months? “Wait a minute.”

“It’s true. You don’t socialize, you spend all your time at that geriatric center or buying property. I don’t understand you.”

“I like my work.”

“You never introduced me to any of your family.”

“I don’t have family.”

“I thought you said you had a sister.”

“I did,” he said in a deceptively neutral voice.

“Where is she?”

He stretched his arms the length of the couch.

“Doesn’t matter. What’s his name?”

“Who?”

“The man you’re in love with.”

“Don’t change the subject. I hate when you do that.”

He stood. “So I guess that’s it.”

She darted in front of him. “No, that isn’t it. I want you to see someone.”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You want to set me up with one of your friends?”

“No, I want you to go to a psychiatrist.”

He laughed.

“Edmund, this isn’t funny.”

He laughed even harder.

Wanda folded her arms and glared at him.

He bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

“Take care of yourself.”

“Edmund, I only want to help you.”

He opened the door. “You did. You set me free.”

He waved, then left.

Edmund knew he should have been heart-broken—no, insulted—but he was too busy thinking of his newly found freedom and the attention he could now give to his work. Anyway, he didn’t need any more women trouble. His relationships never lasted long. Wanda had been a diversion after a long dry spell. His relationship with her would sustain him over the next few months until he wanted a woman’s warm body in his bed again.

Suddenly, he thought about thick high heels and open brown eyes on a plain face. He shook his head. Mary wasn’t his type at all. He liked his women sophisticated, not looking as though they’d scold you if you held your fork wrong. But he had enjoyed talking to her. He wondered what Mary would have said if he’d introduced himself. She probably would have clammed up and ignored him. That would have been a shame. He found her honesty refreshing, although some of what she said about him had bruised his ego. He knew she

was going to be stunned when she discovered who he was, but he knew she would handle it like a professional. He wouldn't have to worry about her making a scene. She wasn't the type. He began to whistle. She thought she'd never see Edmund Davis. He'd have to prove her wrong.

Chapter 3

Mary sat huddled in the corner of her apartment, wrapped in a blanket as the lights from the city seeped through the blinds, mingling with the reddish glow from the setting sun on the wooden floor. She was about to close her eyes when someone knocked on the door.

“Mary, open up. I’m worried about you.”

She recognized the voice but didn’t respond.

“Mrs. McQueeth called me. You forgot to visit her.”

Mary scrambled to her feet. Poor Mrs. Mc-

Queeth. She'd forgotten she had promised to see her today. She had hoped to tell her all about the promotion and services she would now be able to afford for her. Edmund Davis had crushed that dream. Mary opened the door and saw Sara Leon, her friend of ten years. Sara lived in a colonial two blocks away. She was best described as lean, with short hair and a habit of wearing noisy jewelry. Today, large wooden beads hung from her neck.

"I didn't think anything would be wrong with you," Sara said. "Then Mrs. McQueeth reminded me that you were going to be promoted and..." Her words trailed off as she stared at the empty apartment. She pushed past Mary and slowly spun around. "Are you trying to achieve a minimalist effect or something?"

Mary shook her head. "No."

"Are you moving?"

"No."

"Curtis dumped you?"

Mary nodded.

"That bastard."

"He took my champagne," she said bitterly. "Even though I'd bought it with my own money."

Sara clasped her hands together with joy. "So you got the promotion?"

“No.”

Her hands fell to her sides. “Oh, James is a bastard, too. I’m sorry. What was his excuse this time?”

“It wasn’t just James’s fault. Edmund Davis, the investor of one of the projects, asked for me specifically.”

“Why?”

“James didn’t say.”

Sara walked around the room. “This is unbelievable. That bastard Curtis took everything?”

“He was kind enough to leave the bed.”

Sara paused. “Did he leave the sheets?”

Mary shook her head.

“I didn’t think so. Those sheets were expensive.”

“I didn’t really like them anyway. I would have preferred something else besides brown or black.”

Sara sighed. “I really am sorry.” She bit her lip. “Look, why don’t you stay with me and Larry? You’ll get back on your feet soon.”

“That’s okay. I can afford this place and I’ll find furniture. It won’t be as upscale as what Curtis liked, but it will do. Did Mrs. McQueeth get her dinner?”

“Yes. She’d really love to see you, but I know you’re not in the mood to see anyone right now.”

Mary sighed. “It’s all right. I need to get out anyway.”

Moments later she and Sara sat in Mrs. McQueeth's small two-bedroom track house. Mary controlled a shiver in response to the cold dampness that clung to the air. Because of the increase in oil prices, Mrs. McQueeth couldn't afford much and was unable to keep the house adequately heated. Luckily, spring was slowly breaking winter's hold, and warmer temperatures were predicted soon. In spite of her arthritis, Mrs. McQueeth kept her house impeccably clean. The tiny living room had a fading sofa, with fraying all around. Two hand-crafted wooden side tables held bronzed Tiffany lamps (gifts from her only daughter before she died) and a handmade oval rug. But although the house was chilly, the smell of her cooking scented the air. As usual, Mrs. McQueeth had baked Mary's favorite zucchini bread and made a pot of lemon tea. Once settled, Mary told her what had happened, delivering it as cheerfully as she could so she wouldn't depress her friend.

"I was worried about you when you didn't show up," Mrs. McQueeth said, her coarse hands reaching for a teacup. She had the face of a woman who had enjoyed her seventy-two years and claimed every laugh line and the few wrinkles she had embedded on her cinnamon face. "But I couldn't

have imagined the day you had.” She went to a side table and pulled out a book. “His name goes in my magic book.”

Mary laughed. “You still have that?”

She sent her a stern look. “Don’t make fun. It allows me to rest assured that everyone in here gets what they deserve.” She scribbled something down, hiding her words so that neither Sara nor Mary could see, then closed the book and put it away.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call. That was unfair of me.”

“You’re better off without that Curtis character. He may have been rich and good-looking, but he was rotten to the core.”

Mary looked at her, surprised. “But he was always nice to you.”

“But he was never nice to you. You were his personal dishrag. I know that sounds harsh, but I have to say what I saw. You decorated that apartment according to his tastes, ate the foods he liked, vacationed where he wanted to and never got that wedding he’d been promising you for years. No, I’m glad he’s gone. Now you can meet a good man.”

“I’m through with men right now.”

“Don’t say that,” Sara said. “There are plenty of good ones still out there.”

“Most of them are married,” she said, thinking of Sara’s husband, Larry.

“I know Larry is a catch, but he isn’t the only good man around. There must be others.”

Mary briefly thought of the stranger in the elevator. She wondered if he was single. She doubted it. Single men like him didn’t stay single long. But if she’d been a lucky woman, he would be single and she would be his type. She scoffed at the thought. As if a man like that would be interested in a plain woman who needed her cheap, ugly heels stuck back on her shoes with superglue.

But he had been nice, and Mary could imagine spending a day with him and a night and another night...

“What’s his name?” Sara said.

Mary’s face grew hot. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do,” her friend said with a knowing look. “We were talking about men and suddenly you started to smile. You’ve already met Curtis’s replacement.”

“No, I haven’t.”

Sara and Mrs. McQueeth shared a look, then stared at her with doubt.

Mary glanced down at the floor. "I did meet someone today who I thought was very nice."

"What was his name?" Sara asked.

"I don't know."

Her expression fell. "You didn't catch his name?"

"I didn't think to ask." Mary waved a dismissive hand. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll probably never see him again."

Sara and Mrs. McQueeth agreed and changed the subject. After visiting for an hour, Sara left to run errands and Mary left soon after. Before entering her apartment, Mary checked her mailbox. She quickly flipped through the stack of bills and junk mail and saw what looked like an invitation. She was about to toss it away along with the "Still Single?" junk mail she received every few months, but something about it made her curious and she opened it.

It read: *You have been personally selected to join The Black Stockings Society, an elite, members-only club that will change your life and help you find the man of your dreams. Guaranteed.*

Yeah, right, Mary sniffed. It's probably just another scheme wanting to get her money. *Black Stockings Society, indeed.*

She was again about to toss it in the recycling bin when she noticed how it had been addressed:

“To Ms. Mary Antoinette Reyland.” Only a few people knew her middle name. Who had sent the invitation? Why hadn’t they signed their name? She grew more curious as she noticed it was a handwritten note, on expensive parchment paper, lined with finely woven lace in a gold-lined envelope. Mary thought for a moment. Things couldn’t get any worse. It was probably someone trying to cheer her up. Why not? She read more.

Dumped? Bored? Tired of being single? Ready to live dangerously?

Yes, yes, yes!

Then this is the club for you. Guaranteed results! Submit your application today.

Mary rushed into her apartment and began filling out the enclosed questionnaire. Some of the questions seemed laughable.

How would you spend a day at home? With someone wonderful.

Would you prefer roses or daffodils? Roses.

What would your ideal man be like?

This question made Mary pause; then she thought of the man in the elevator and wrote, *Attractive, kind and sexy*, then added, *with warm brown eyes*. Her stranger may have been the first three, but his intense cool gaze was unsettling.

She didn't think the questionnaire made much sense and doubted her answers would be very helpful but filled it out as truthfully as she could. When she was finished she carefully read the "sworn oath" at the bottom of the page: *As a member of The Black Stockings Society, I swear I will not reveal club secrets, I will accept nothing but the best and I will no longer settle for less.*

Mary hesitated, wondering if she'd be able to keep it a secret (if it were true), then thought about the promise of a new life and recklessly signed. Before sealing the envelope, she attached a check for the nominal membership fee, then decided to post the application that evening. She drove to her local post office and with fingers crossed popped it in the drive-by mailbox.

Two days later, a medium-size package arrived. When she opened it Mary stared at the contents in horror. It had to be wrong. Someone had sent her the wrong package. She couldn't wear these, she thought as she held up a pair of black fishnet stockings. Where would she wear them and with what?

The package included four pairs of different types of stockings, a membership card that read, *Mary A. Reyland, Member, The Black Stockings*

Society, and strict instructions. Always one to follow rules, she read them immediately.

Welcome to The Black Stockings Society. Your first assignment is to take your membership card to Mimi's Hair Salon, where you will ask for their deluxe special. Then you will go to the Boutique Nouveau and ask for Rania. Set aside plenty of time for each of these appointments. Directions, including a map and phone numbers, were included.

Once you have visited these two locations, you will select one of your pairs of stockings to wear to your next business meeting.

Her next meeting? The one where she was to meet Gregory Trent, the program manager at the senior community? No, she couldn't. What would he think?

Mary chewed her bottom lip, then she decided that it didn't matter what he thought. She'd spent too much of her life caring about what other people thought. If she wanted this to work, she would have to do exactly as she was instructed. Her old life wasn't working; this couldn't be worse.

That Saturday, Mary drove to the hair salon. She hesitated. The upscale double-glass doors intimidated her. She didn't belong there. She always let Sara do her perms. She glanced at her membership card and the address she'd written down. This

was the right place and the start of her new life. She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

As soon as she entered, Mary nearly ran back outside, feeling like an imposter. The opulent surroundings overwhelmed her—the gentle rush of a water fountain and the brightly colored plant collection, whose perfumed scent filled the air, greeted visitors in the entryway. The marbled floors and beveled mirrors lining the entrance gave the impression that she was entering a grand ballroom. The smartly dressed attendant behind the large mahogany desk looked up at Mary as though she were a homeless woman who'd stepped off the streets. "May I help you?" she said in a tone that said she probably couldn't.

"I'd like an appointment."

"I'm afraid we're booked until summer."

"Oh, but I was told to come here."

"Who told you?"

Mary faltered. She couldn't tell them that some unknown person had given her instructions. "A friend."

"I'm sorry, but your *friend* should have told you that we fill up fast."

"Perhaps there will be a cancellation?" Mary said hopefully.

The attendant's disdain grew. "People know better than to cancel on us."

This wasn't working, and the female bulldog hired to guard the entrance of this sanctuary wasn't going to let her pass. Mary turned to go and nearly crashed into a tall, expensively dressed woman barreling through the doors. "I want an appointment now," she said.

The attendant looked at her computer. "I could get someone to see you in about two hours."

"Two hours doesn't sound like *now* to me. When I say now I mean within ten minutes and that's being generous."

"One moment, please." The attendant picked up the phone then spoke in low tones to someone. When she hung up, she looked relieved. "Someone will see you shortly."

Mary stared at her, shocked. "But I thought you said there weren't any..." Her words died away when she realized both women were ignoring her.

"Good," the tall woman said, then waltzed into the waiting room.

Mary watched her go, then stared at the attendant, who was doing an expert job of making her feel invisible. The old Mary would have slunk away, but this was the *new* Mary. The new Mary

wasn't going to be sent away. Mary approached the desk more determined. "I would like an appointment and don't say I have to wait because she didn't have to."

"No, but *you* do." The attendant returned her gaze to the computer and Mary's patience snapped. James had turned on her, Curtis had betrayed her and she wasn't going to accept it anymore. She reached across the desk and planted her hand on top of the keyboard. "Listen to me you little twit. Don't you dare act as if you own this place when we both know if you were fired you couldn't afford to get your nails trimmed here. You don't know who I am, but I will make you regret this day if you don't make an appointment for me right now. I'll give you five minutes."

The attendant blinked, unsure of what to do next. She sent Mary a look as though she were trying to guess if Mary really was someone important in disguise or a fraud. She decided not to make a wrong guess. "We really are busy, but I could fit you in Monday. I only let that woman in because she can be a real bitch. You don't want to be that way."

Mary smiled coolly. "Only if it works."

"What would you like done?"

Mary flashed her card. "The deluxe special."

The attendant's eyes widened at the sight of the card, and she gasped as though she was taking in her last breath. "Oh, my God! Cathy, come quick and look at this." Another woman rushed over and stared at the card. "Wow. I've heard about this, but I've never seen one." She looked at Mary, amazed. "How did you get it?"

Her friend nudged her. "You know she can't tell you that."

"You are *so* lucky."

The attendant looked at her computer. "Cynthia will be free if you can wait ten minutes. She's one of our best. You'll really like her."

Mary could barely hide her excitement. She'd gone from weeks to days to minutes. This card had power. "Certainly."

The attendant directed Mary to a waiting area. Mary sat, amazed that the card could open doors for her. Within moments an attractive woman with high cheekbones and her hair tightly cornrowed came out, introduced herself and ushered Mary into a private room. The room was grander than the entrance and waiting area. She took Mary's coat and handbag and offered her a choice of tea, coffee or hot chocolate with whipped cream, which Mary declined. "Cynthia will be right with you," she said, then left.

Still feeling out of place, Mary began looking around at all the amenities the salon offered. At the push of a button, the foot pad of the chair offered a five-minute massage, and skin-softening gloves were within reach along with massage oil. She had her own personal music player, with an enormous collection of songs, and the salon chair offered a full ten-minute hot back massage for free. Mary fought not to be overwhelmed.

Suddenly an imposing young lady, wearing a bright blue embroidered jacket, entered. “Hi, I’m Cynthia. It’s Mary, isn’t it? Nice to have you here today.” She extended her hand while simultaneously looking over Mary’s hair. “Wow, you have thick hair—what kind of shampoo and conditioner have you been using?” At first Mary was taken aback. She had gone to a salon only twice in her life and had never been asked any questions.

Cynthia drew up a chair, pulled out a clipboard and started going over a list of questions. Did she take vitamins? How many hours did she sleep? Was she on any medications? The questions were so extensive, for a moment Mary thought she was in her doctor’s office for her annual physical.

“You may wonder why I’m asking all these questions, but in addition to looking at your hair,

I want to make sure I use the right products that will be best for you.” Mary thought for a moment, *I wonder how much this will cost.* Cynthia answered, without being asked.

“You don’t need to worry about the cost of the products. They are included with the fee.” Mary didn’t dare ask what the fee would be.

Two hours later Mary looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair had been cut into a short crop, with a softening cream added to bring out her natural curls and reddish-brown highlights were added to liven up her dull hair color.

“What do you think?” Cynthia asked.

“Wow. Is that really me?” Mary asked. She had always wanted to try something different and liked what she saw.

“Yes, that’s the new you. Now I’m going to send you off to Toni—she’s our makeup artist.” Mary wasn’t in the habit of wearing makeup because she had never been taught. She could hear her mother’s voice now, “You’re plain. With makeup you’ll just be plain in Technicolor.” But today she would ignore that voice. She was eager to learn.

The session with Toni went well. Instead of applying the makeup herself, she showed Mary how to do it. After several tries, Mary was able to

use the eyelash curler, but not without first pulling out a few lashes. Because Mary wanted a natural look, Toni introduced her to a line of makeup that accentuated her features and natural skin tone, instead of covering it. But what Mary enjoyed most was selecting the right colors for her full lips. Her lips were two-toned, and she always had trouble finding the right color. Toni showed her the secret—use two colors! At the end of the session, Mary went back to Cynthia to show her the finished product. She looked nothing less than stunning.

“You look fantastic!” Cynthia said.

“Now about the cost...” Mary said as she began looking in her handbag for her credit card.

“It comes with the membership. Didn’t you read everything?”

“I did, but I thought it meant the items I received in the package. I didn’t expect it to cover this, too.”

“You’re part of the Society now. Everything’s included with your membership payment and your life is going to change in ways you never expected.”

Eager to add a new wardrobe to match her new look, Mary went to the Boutique Nouveau on Sunday and was disappointed to find that it was closed. Instead, she bought herself a bouquet of flowers at

the local market, then decided to stop by her office. Like her, it needed a face-lift. No more boring walls. Mary spent the entire afternoon moving things around. She put up several framed pictures and put the bouquet of flowers in a slender crystal vase and placed it in a prominent spot on her desk. She replaced an old calendar with a brightly colored one filled with the artwork of contemporary black artists.

That Monday morning, Mary woke up two hours earlier than usual and carefully applied her makeup and styled her hair. Her suit was still the same—a dull brown—but the woman wearing it was different.

“Wish me luck,” she said to Cammie, patting her on the head and letting her out to roam.

The whispers started the moment Mary entered the office. Jean rushed over to her. “You look wonderful!”

“Thank you.”

“And I love your office. I wish I could make my area look like that.”

“At lunch I can take you to a nice shop I found that has lots of lovely knickknacks at affordable prices.”

“I’d love that. See you at one o’clock.”

Most of the morning, Mary was too busy to notice the glances and looks directed her way. She

didn't even observe that Brad, the office hotshot, had walked by her desk at least three times trying to catch her attention. There was one person she wanted to see react, but James had his blinds shut due to an important meeting.

After an extended lunch, Mary and Jean came back carrying several large bags and a growing friendship. Mary helped Jean decorate her office. Once satisfied, Mary returned to her desk. Before she could sit down, Dianne popped her head out of her office and called to her.

"I can't believe it. Is that really you, Mary?"

Mary turned. "Yes, it's me."

"Can I talk to you?"

Mary resisted a sigh, stood up from her desk and followed Dianne into her office. She sat and saw a picture of Dianne's boyfriend prominently displayed on the oak-stained desk.

"I need a favor." She rested a large stack of papers on the desk. "I need you to go over these reports for me. I have so much to do—"

"No."

"What?"

"No. I can't help you."

"Why?"

"Because I have plenty *I* have to do."

“Like what?” Dianne challenged.

“The assignments my predecessor on The New Day Senior Living Community did not do in addition to my other existing projects.”

“Put those aside for now. I need these done.”

“That will not be possible.” Mary stood, ready to leave.

Dianne flashed a cool smile. “I’m your supervisor now. I could get you fired.”

“I’d like to see you try. Edmund Davis specifically asked for me to work on this project. I think he’d be pretty upset not to have me begin working on it immediately.”

“We’ll see about that.” Dianne marched out of the room and headed for James’s office. Mary returned to her desk. Ten minutes later James phoned and requested she see him.

James’s face froze when he saw her. Dianne stared at her with a look that said “*You may look good, but I can still put you in your place.*”

“Yes?” Mary said.

James continued to stare.

“James!” Dianne demanded.

He collected himself and tugged on his tie. “Yes, uh, Dianne said you and she had a disagreement.”

Mary took the empty seat next to Dianne, ignoring her. "That's right."

"Mary, it's not like you not to get on with others. You're a team player."

Mary adjusted her skirt.

James shifted in his seat. "Can I resolve this issue?"

"It *is* resolved. Dianne asked me to do her a favor and I refused."

"Why? You do favors for others all the time."

"I don't do favors anymore. I need to focus on my work, not on others'."

"But you always used to—"

"That's never gotten me promoted."

"Is that what this is all about?" Dianne sneered. "You're trying out this new look and attitude because you're upset I was promoted?"

Mary ignored her, looking directly at James. "May I leave now?"

"Don't try to ignore me."

James held up his hand. "Dianne, I'll talk to you later."

Dianne stood, glared at Mary, then left, slamming the door behind her.

Once she was gone James sighed in resignation. "Don't do this, Mary. I really wanted you to have

the position, but I couldn't. Just help Dianne this one time and smooth things over."

"Okay."

He smiled with relief. "Good."

Mary stood and opened the door. "And you can tell Edmund Davis I can't start on his project until next month."

James jumped up from his desk and ran after Mary as she headed down the hall. "You know I can't do that," he said. "Edmund would—" he ran a hand down his face "—fine. I'll deal with Dianne."

Mary calmly sat at her desk. "Good."

He stared at her for a moment. "What's gotten into you?"

She only smiled.

That evening, James held a small red shopping basket carrying milk, two bottles of antacid and other items when he suddenly saw Edmund at the end of the aisle tossing a loaf of wheat bread into his basket. His first instinct was to run. After having to deal with Dianne's temper he didn't want any more conflict. He thought for a moment, then decided that he had to do his duty and warn Edmund about Mary.

“Hey, Davis.”

Edmund spun around and waved. When James approached him, Edmund reached into James’s basket and pulled out a bottle promising to ease stomach troubles. Edmund clicked his tongue. “You either need to change your diet or get a new job.” He tossed the bottle back into the basket.

“Yeah. Well...speaking of change there’s something you should know.”

“About what?”

“About Mary.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Things are a little different now.”

“Gregory can handle her and so can I.”

“But—”

“You don’t have to worry about anything. You worry too much—that’s why you have to take *those*.” He pointed to the items in his cart.

“No, it’s not that simple.”

“Anything can be made simple.”

“But Mary’s changed.”

“That’s okay. She won’t cause us any trouble.”

“That’s just the point. She—”

“Stop worrying.” Edmund patted James on the shoulder. “Now go finish your shopping.”

James sighed and left.

* * *

The following Saturday, Mary woke up early and drove to Boutique Nouveau, which was located on the other side of town. Once inside the store, she fought her way through the display of trendy, thin mannequins and asked for Rania, as directed in the instructions. A woman the length of a pogo stick, and just as wide, looked at Mary's ample frame and said, "I'm not sure we carry what you need."

Mary placed her membership card on the counter. "I'm sure Rania can help me."

The clerk looked at the card as though it were a cache of jewels. She sent Mary an incredulous look, then pushed a button. Within moments, a dark-skinned, full-figured woman of medium height, who walked with a hip-swaying confidence on four-inch high heels, came out. Her hair was worn in thick, large braids swept up on top of her head, with a decorative satin ribbon wound around it. Exquisitely designed earrings hung from her ears and an armful of gold bangles and bracelets encircled her wrists. "Hello, Mary, I'm Rania."

"How did you know my name?"

"I was expecting you."

Rania led Mary through a narrow passageway

into an adjacent building and then into a large room where a selection of clothing, shoes, bags, jewelry and other accessories waited.

“These are all yours,” Rania said, gesturing to the items. “We are going to spend the majority of today helping you select the right outfits and accessories that will work for you.”

“But these must be worth thousands of dollars!”

Rania smiled. “And you’re worth it. Right?”

“Right. But, how do I...”

“There is no cost to you. You’re now a member of The Society.” She lifted a suede skirt. A dangerous little number Mary would never have looked at before. Rania raised a challenging eyebrow. “Ready to have some fun?”

Mary left nearly seven hours later. She’d gone to the boutique wearing a pair of jeans and an extra large T-shirt but left with four enormous bags full of clothes and dressed in a light blue silk blouse, suede trousers and mid-size red leather heels. She’d also developed a strut she was unaware of that made men turn their heads and elicited two loud whistles.

But it wasn’t only strangers who took notice. When she wore one of her new outfits to work that Monday, one of the program managers she super-

vised dropped off his report in person, something he rarely did, and stayed an extra half hour to discuss things. Female coworkers were so impressed with her transformation they kept asking for tips on how to apply makeup. Mary tried to help them with the knowledge she'd gained.

"Did you rob a bank or something?" Dianne asked, staring at Mary's new clothes. "That looks like real cashmere."

Mary ignored her and continued what she was doing.

"How can you afford all this? I know how much you make."

"You were right."

"What?"

"I robbed a bank."

Dianne frowned and left. Over the rest of the week, Mary had a blast trying out her new outfits and enjoyed having lunch with Jean and meeting with her program managers. One evening, as she prepared to leave, James approached her. "Mary, I have a favor to ask. It's a small, simple, easy favor."

"What is it?"

"Go easy on Gregory Trent's project."

"Why? Afraid I'll make Edmund Davis angry if I'm too tough?"

“This is a serious matter.”

“You know I’m always professional, James. You have nothing to worry about.” She turned and left.

But the next day Mary was the one to be worried as she sat on her bed staring at the pair of thigh-high fishnet stockings she was instructed to wear to her first business meeting with Gregory Trent that morning. How would they fit? How would they look? What if they didn’t stay up? She’d had fun wearing the new items Rania had selected, but she hadn’t been bold enough to try on any of the stockings.

“Am I crazy?” she asked Cammie, who sat next to her on the bed.

Cammie just blinked.

Mary wore a fitted olive-green suit and glass beaded jewelry Rania had selected. She saved the stockings for last. “Okay, here goes.”

She slid them on. They were not what she expected. At first she thought she’d feel naked. She worried they might fall down, but they felt like silk. The ultra-fine silver thread, creating the fishnet appearance against her skin, made her legs look sumptuous. They had never looked so good before. After admiring herself in her full-length mirror for several minutes, Mary stepped

into a pair of three-inch open-toed black patent leather shoes. She stared at her reflection and barely recognized the woman staring back. She liked what she saw. No one was going to pass her over this time.

Mary arrived at the location twenty minutes early. She surveyed the carefully groomed grounds that complemented a row of select stores and eating venues. Mary knew from her research that The New Day Senior Living Community was a pilot project that Edmund and the other investors hoped would be replicated around the country. While there were numerous senior living communities for wealthy individuals, by creating a community subsidized with both federal funds and private-pay residents, it enabled half of the residents to be low-income seniors.

The community also consisted of a wellness clinic, a complete sports arena and, for those individuals with physical limitations, a special activity center with virtual games. And of course, there was the pristine golf course that was used by both the residents and the public, for a small fee.

Mary found herself enjoying the community so much that she was nearly late for her meeting and ended up racing to the main office. Fortunately,

when she got there, the door was open and the room empty. However, once inside she heard shuffling behind a desk.

“Hello?”

A man popped his head up from behind the desk, then quickly rose to his feet. He stared at her, stunned; Mary did the same.

“You!” she said. She’d dreamed of meeting the stranger from the elevator again, but she’d never thought it would be so soon. She was so happy to see him again she could have leaped over the table and hugged him. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“No,” he said in a choked voice.

“I guess Mr. Trent’s not here yet. Were you working on his computer system or something?”

“I was just checking a connection.”

“Oh.” He looked too dressed up to be a technician, but she didn’t want to pry. He also didn’t seem as happy to see her as she was to see him. Some of her joy died. “I guess I’d better take a seat and wait.” She glanced around the office, only to see that every surface was covered in papers. One possible option was a chair in the corner piled high with papers and a briefcase. The stranger noticed it and came from behind the desk.

“Excuse me,” he said and removed the papers,

then lifted up the briefcase. Unfortunately, he had forgotten to close the latch and the contents scattered on the floor. He held up his hands, warding Mary off when she bent down, ready to help him. “No, I’m fine. Just sit.” He knelt and quickly gathered his things. “I guess today’s my day to be unlucky.”

She frowned. “Because of me?”

He reached for something near her foot and his arm brushed against her leg. The contact made her skin prickle with pleasure; her heart picked up pace. At that moment Mary forgot all about Curtis and the tardy Mr. Trent—she wanted to know more about this man. She wanted to know what other classic books he liked to read; how he liked his coffee in the morning. Did he like coffee? Did he wear pajamas or go to bed naked?

She knew her thoughts were not professional, but she didn’t want to miss her chance and watch him walk out of her life again.

“Would you like to go out sometime?” The words escaped her mouth so quickly that to her own ears she sounded as though she was spouting gibberish, but in truth her words were a garbled whisper.

The man stopped and looked at her. His cool grayish-brown eyes bore into hers, and again she

was reminded of snow drifts and the Arctic. She felt like a fool, and braced herself for the rejection, hoping that perhaps he hadn't heard her so she could pretend she'd said something else.

"Sure," he said.

Never had such a simple word sounded so beautiful. "Really?" She shook her head. The new Mary *expected* a man to say "yes." "Great... Um... I know a wonderful café that serves coffee and cakes."

"Mary."

"Or there's a concert in the park. I'm not sure of the music, but we could find out."

"Mary."

"Or there's—"

He rested a hand on her knee. "Mary!"

"Yes?"

He glanced down and saw where his hand was and removed it. "All those sound great, but there's something you have to know first."

Her heart slowly cracked. "You're married."

"No."

"You're engaged."

"No."

"You're seeing someone."

"No, Mary, I—"

“You’re gay. I knew it was too good to be true, but that’s okay. We can still be friends. You—”

He smothered her words with a kiss that left her breathless. When he pulled away she was certain she’d melt. She touched her lips, which still burned from his kiss, and gazed up at him. “You’re not gay?”

He shook his head. “No.” He lifted the briefcase and closed it, looking a little ill. “But there’s something you should know.”

Just then another man entered the room waving a file. “Edmund, I found it. We’re all set for when that woman arrives. She can—” He stopped. He glanced at Mary, then at Edmund. Edmund shut his eyes and groaned as though in pain. Mary stared at the two men, confused.

The newcomer smiled at Mary and held out his hand. “I’m Gregory Trent, and who might you be?”

She shook his hand. He wasn’t at all as she’d pictured him. He had a full head of hair, great smile and physique and was in his late forties. “I’m Mary Reyland, your project supervisor.”

Gregory jumped back as though she’d struck him. He spun around to face the other man. “But, Edmund, you said—”

“I know what I said,” he snapped.

Mary stared at him. Then stared at the stranger

she'd been fantasizing about for weeks, the man she'd asked out on a date and had just imagined naked. *He'd* made her lose her promotion and had listened to her talk about it. "You lied to me," she said in a low voice.

"I didn't lie."

Gregory shook his head, sensing the tension between them. "What's going on here?"

She stared at Edmund, still stunned. "You're Edmund? The man who wears a bow tie, has a bald spot and a lisp?"

"No, that was Gregory. I'm the chain-smoking workaholic."

Gregory frowned. "What are you talking about? You don't smoke."

Mary gripped her hands into fists. "When I met you on the elevator you knew who I was. You'd probably just finished telling James that you wanted me on this project. You're the reason I lost my promotion!"

"I—"

"You let me talk and talk without revealing who you were."

"I didn't think it was the right time."

"You could have told me before I asked you out."

Gregory stared. "She asked you out?"

“And you kissed me.”

“You kissed her?”

Edmund turned to him with a vicious glare. “Pretend you’re not here.”

Gregory walked to the other side of the room and sat at his desk.

“Mary, I’m sorry.” He paused. “Wait. I’m not sorry I kissed you, but I should have told you who I was.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Your opinion of me wasn’t very high.”

She rested her hands on her hips. “It’s even lower now.”

He slyly raised an eyebrow. “Then I’ll have to do what I can to change that.”

“You won’t get the chance.”

“I don’t wait for chances.”

She closed her eyes, embarrassment burning her skin. “To think that I was...” She stopped before she said *attracted to you*. Mary opened her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m not upset. This is good. We both understand each other. And you gave me an advantage, in a way.”

“How?”

She flashed a wicked grin. “I know you believe in revenge.”

Chapter 4

He'd made a slight error in judgment, and he knew he would pay for it. Edmund sighed. He was already paying. Instead of arguing with her, he wished he was finishing the kiss he'd started, but he wouldn't be kissing her again for a while. *Mary had changed. She was different.* Richardson had warned him. He should have paid more attention. Now he couldn't stop paying attention. He loved the way she sat with her legs together off to the side, while the slit of her fitted skirt rose up her thigh, taunting him with the possibility that if she crossed her legs, the skirt would go an inch higher.

No more drab boring suit and hair. Those brown eyes he'd remembered from before now looked at him with disgust. He knew she hated him, but all he could think of was pulling down her stockings and...he swore. He had to focus. He shouldn't think of how her new hairstyle brought out the softness of her skin or how her suit hugged her form in a way that could give a man dangerous ideas.

Mary reached for her portfolio, adjusting her skirt in the process. Both men followed her movement with such intensity that neither of them heard her speak.

"What?" Gregory said, absently replying to what she'd said.

"I'll need weekly reports," Mary repeated.

He shook his head. "I don't have time for weekly reports."

"You'll make time."

Gregory glared at Edmund. Edmund sighed. Great, now he had two people who would gladly burn him at the stake.

"You'll also need to come up with a form to report the numerous 'benefits' you have stated that the seniors will gain from living in this new community of yours. They will need to be measurable

data so that I, I mean the government, can see how its money is being used.” She shook her head when Edmund opened his mouth. “No, Mr. Davis, this is nonnegotiable.” Once she’d finished giving Gregory all of her instructions, Mary closed her notebook and looked up at him. “Do you have any questions?”

“How long will your vengeance last?” Edmund asked.

She smiled. “This isn’t part of any vengeance.”

“I know for certain you didn’t monitor any of your other projects this closely.”

“No, I guess you’re just lucky.” Mary stood. “Since you don’t have any questions...” She shook Gregory’s hand, then extended her hand to Edmund for a handshake. He grasped her hand and didn’t let go.

“There’s no need for us to be enemies, Ms. Reyland,” he said with a soft warning.

She tried to pull her hand free. “Good day, Mr. Davis.”

His grip tightened. “You’re really angry, aren’t you?”

“Furious.”

He lowered his gaze in regret. “I was afraid of that.”

“Fear is good.”

He nodded.

“Good day, Mr. Davis,” Mary repeated through clenched teeth.

Edmund glanced up and realized he still had her hand trapped in his. “Good day, Ms. Reyland,” he said in a more subdued tone, then released her.

After she left, Gregory leaned back in his chair and held his head. “We’re screwed!”

“No, we’re not.”

Gregory sat forward, incredulous, and pointed to the door. “That was Mary Reyland? The dull, ordinary woman who was going to leave us alone to do what we want? That’s the one you specifically asked Richardson to put on our project?”

“She wasn’t like that two weeks ago. You should have seen her.”

“I can’t forget her. Did you see those legs?”

“Yes, I saw them.”

“Did you notice the way she kept crossing them every time she gave a new demand?”

Edmund had noticed a lot more than that, and his body had, too. He would have to stay seated a little longer than normal. “Hmm.”

“She’s going to be a problem, isn’t she?”

“No.”

“She manages our purse strings. She’s basically got us by the—”

“She’s just exerting a little power, but she’s the same Mary underneath.”

“Did you really kiss her?”

“Yes.”

Gregory shook his head. “Bad move.”

“I don’t regret it.”

“We’re going to.”

“You leave her to me.”

Gregory began to grin. “Is that a suggestion or a warning?”

“A word of advice.”

“What are you going to do first?”

Edmund stared at the door thoughtfully. “Find her weakness.”

Why couldn’t he have been married? Mary fumed on the way back to her office. Or gay? She could take his being gay. Instead he was Edmund Davis. To think that she’d actually been attracted to him! She’d fallen for the same type as Curtis: arrogant, demanding, controlling and conniving. It had been a moment of weakness—she wouldn’t do it again. He’d kissed her and was probably silently

laughing about how he had fooled her. To think she'd thought it was all real when he knew that sooner or later she would discover who he truly was. His heart was as cold as his eyes. Tears burned her own as she remembered how he'd accepted her date. She felt stupid—as though she'd been the punchline of a cruel joke.

Mary blinked the tears away. She didn't want to ruin her makeup and go back into the office with red eyes. She'd forget him. Fortunately, she didn't have to work with him, anyway. With her new look and attitude she decided that the new Mary would always be in control and the new man in her life would live by her rules. She was a member of The Black Stockings Society, and no one would use her as a doormat again.

For the remainder of the day, Mary worked in silence and people stayed clear of her, sensing her bad mood. At lunch she glanced up and saw Dianne with her boyfriend, who looked just as handsome and vibrant as his picture. Mary watched them leave with envy, old insecurities beginning to seep in. She wanted the office, the promotion, the caring boyfriend who dropped by “just to say hello” and treated her to expensive restaurants. She sniffed. With her luck she'd likely end up with

someone who'd offer her stale coffee and a two-day-old sandwich in the building cafeteria. Mary opened her wallet and saw the society membership card and remembered her luck had changed.

When her phone rang, Mary answered, trying hard to fake a mood she didn't feel. "Mary Reylan. How may I help you?"

A familiar male voice came on the line. "You forgot to tell me when to pick you up."

Her heart froze. "I'm sorry?"

"For our date," Edmund said.

"We don't have a date," she said, gritting her teeth. "Goodbye, Mr. Davis." She slammed the phone down. When it rang again she let the answering service take it.

She hated him. She would never go out with him and she'd never ask another man out again. They'd have to come to her. Edmund Davis would regret putting her on his project because she was going to use it to get her promotion. She wouldn't be passed over next year. She would make sure to get the attention of key individuals, above James, so that he would be *forced* to promote her or lose his job. The thought made her smile, and she scheduled the rest of her activities that week with that goal in mind.

Several days later, Sara and Larry stopped by to visit with a surprise, but when they saw her they were the ones who got the surprise.

“What happened?” Sara asked, stunned.

“You look sensational,” Larry said, an attractive man who looked like he enjoyed too much beer and not enough exercise.

“Thanks,” Mary said, a little embarrassed.

“Really sensational.”

Sara sent her husband a censored look. “You’ve said that.” She looked at Mary again. “I hardly recognize you. Did you lose weight or something?”

Mary shook her head. “No.”

“I think she’s beautiful just the way she is,” Larry said, adjusting his position to get a full view of her. “You won’t be lonely long.”

“No,” Sara said in a strange voice.

Mary motioned to the folding chairs she had in the living room. “So why did you two stop by?”

“We have a surprise for you,” Larry said. “We discovered we had some extra furniture in the basement and thought you could make use of it.”

“That’s very thoughtful.”

“They’re still in the truck,” Larry said, noticing that his wife hadn’t taken her gaze off Mary.

Mary turned toward her bedroom. "Then I'd better get changed so I can help you."

"No, there's no need," Larry said quickly, taking out his mobile and motioning for Mary to sit down. "I've got some buddies who can help me move them."

Sara frowned. "I thought you said that the three of us could manage."

"I changed my mind. Some of the chairs are really heavy. We wouldn't want you ladies to hurt yourselves."

"But—"

Larry turned his back to Sara and began talking on the phone.

"I can't tell you how happy this makes me," Mary said. The two women sat on a pair of folding chairs.

Sara smiled weakly. "I'm glad. I'm just shocked is all. Only a couple of weeks ago you were you. Now you look so different."

"I know."

"What happened?"

Before Mary could reply, Larry turned to them. "Everything is settled," he said with a note of triumph. "You ladies leave everything to me."

Mary leaped from her chair and hugged him. "Thanks, Larry, this is wonderful."

He blushed. "You're welcome." He opened the door. "I'll just wait outside for the guys."

Sara folded her arms. "How many guys did you call?"

"Enough to help me move the furniture." He winked, then left.

"Come into the kitchen," Mary said to Sara. "I'll make some tea."

In the kitchen, Sara sat on a stool and watched her friend. "You haven't answered my question yet. What happened?"

Mary hesitated. She knew she couldn't tell Sara about the society. It was part of the rules. "After losing the promotion and Curtis, I knew that I needed to live my life differently."

"You'll probably start on a diet soon, too."

"No, although I'd love to be a size six like you, I know I never will be."

"Right. But how did you afford all this? I mean the hairstyle and the clothes?"

"I had a little savings."

"You must have had *a lot* of savings. I saw that same skirt in Bloomingdale's for eight hundred dollars."

"I found a discount boutique store."

"You'll have to tell me where."

“They were closing out.”

Sara narrowed her eyes. “You’re hiding something from me.”

“Yes,” Mary admitted, unable to lie anymore to her friend. “But I made a promise. I can’t tell you everything—however, I will go back and see if I can get some items for you. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sara said, although her tone made it clear that it wasn’t okay at all.

Someone knocked on the door. Mary removed the boiling water from the stove, eager to escape the disappointed expression on her friend’s face. “I’d better go answer that.” She opened the door and saw Larry with two of his friends, Derrick and Tomas, men she’d met before at parties Sara and Larry had held. “Mary, you look great,” Derrick said. He was a handsome man with a great burly physique who had never noticed her before.

“Really great,” Tomas agreed, giving Mary an admiring look.

She opened the door wider. “Thanks, guys.”

“Just tell us where you want things to go,” Larry said. “You won’t have to lift a finger.” It took the men over an hour to move everything: chairs, lamps, tables. The items were worn and not in Mary’s chosen style, but they would prove useful

and she was grateful for her friends' generosity. Once the moving was done, Mary offered everyone tea and cupcakes.

"Mmm, these are delicious," Derrick said.

"I made them myself. I like to bake."

"You also like to eat, too, don't you, Mary?" Sara said.

"Yes," Mary replied, wondering why her friend needed to mention that. "There's no denying that."

Derrick winked at her. "There's no need to deny it."

Mary felt her face grow warm.

Sara stood. "I guess it's time to go."

Derrick leaned back farther in his seat. "I'm in no rush."

Tomas stretched his legs out. "Me neither."

"Larry?" Sara said.

The only thing Larry looked ready to move was his mouth as he lifted his third cupcake. "Give us time to rest, honey. It's been a hard day."

They stayed another hour. The men asked Mary about her job and cooking, then told her what they were doing. Finally, after much throat clearing, a loud yawn and a swift kick Sara convinced Larry that it was time to go.

“I’d like to see you again,” Derrick said before he left.

Mary’s heart lifted with delight. “That would be nice.”

They made a date and Mary closed the door, feeling wonderful. Then she looked at her new furniture and winced. She’d have to get used to the antler lamps, room-size faded sofa and bright green side tables that looked like they were painted in the disco era by someone on drugs. Mary knelt down and took Cammie out of her cage. “It’s the thought that counts, right? I’ll just have to put a sheet over . . . most of it. At least the place doesn’t look as bare.”

The rest of the week, Mary tried to push Edmund firmly from her mind. But he wasn’t the type of person one could easily forget, especially when he called every day and sent her e-mails, which Mary promptly deleted. That weekend Mary kept very busy. She went out and bought food for Cammie and brightly colored sheets to put over her sofa and chairs, then tried to find a way to get the smell of dog out of the rug Sara and Larry had given her. She was busy scrubbing out an unsightly stain she’d noticed in one of the donated throw cushions when she heard someone knock at the door.

Mary pulled off her gloves, hoping it wasn’t

one of the neighbors complaining about the smell of her cleaning products. She swung the door open, ready to apologize, then stumbled back in shock. “What are you doing here?”

Edmund rested his hand on the wall. “You owe me a date.”

She rested her hip against the door frame. “Do you prefer fresh or dried?”

“That’s not the kind of date I mean.”

Mary began to close the door. “You’re not getting any kind of date from me.”

He stopped her. “But that’s not the only reason I’m here. I wouldn’t have come if you’d responded to my calls and e-mails.”

“I’ll remember that next time.” She reached for the door again.

“Just hear me out. I want to offer a truce.”

“There’s no need for a truce.”

“I made you lose your promotion and I want to make it up to you.”

She stared at him curiously. “How?”

“May I come in?”

So you can laugh at my antler lamps and gray shag rug? “No.”

“I want to offer Mrs. McQueeth an apartment at The New Day Senior Living Community.”

“She couldn’t afford it.”

“I’ll take care of everything.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He handed her an envelope. “Here. It’s all set. She can move in this week. I’ll pay for the moving costs if necessary.”

Mary looked at the glossy brochure. It was a tempting offer and she could feel herself weakening, then she looked at him. His watchful, cool grayish-brown eyes doused any flame of desire and rid her of the temptation to say yes.

“No.”

“This is what you wanted. She would get around-the-clock care, food, activities—all for free.”

“You’re being nice. That’s not like you.” She handed him back the envelope. “You want me to back off your project. This is a bribe.”

A flash of hurt entered his eyes; she chose to believe it was her imagination. “No, it is not a bribe. I won’t deny that I would like you to be more lenient with Gregory—perhaps he could do monthly reports instead of weekly ones—but this has nothing to do with that. Can I come inside?”

“No.”

He sighed, frustrated. “The offer has no strings attached.”

“With men like you there are *always* strings.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know you well enough not to trust you.”

“I apologize that I made a bad first impression, but I’m not as bad as you think. I’ve visited Mrs. McQueeth—”

Her wariness flared into outrage. “You did what?”

“And I know that our community will be perfect for her.”

“You had no right to see her.”

“And you have no right to deny her good care because you want to punish me.”

“I’m not trying to punish you. I just don’t want to owe you.”

“You’re sure we can’t discuss this inside?”

“Completely sure.”

He briefly measured her. “I could push past you.”

“Yes, and leave feet first.” She lifted the object in her hand in a menacing gesture, only to realize that it was a harmless scrub brush.

Edmund grinned. “You plan to hurt me with that?”

“There are knives in the kitchen,” she warned.

“Fine. I won’t come in. We can discuss it at Mrs. McQueeth’s place.” He turned and headed for the elevators.

“No! Edmund, come back here.” When he didn’t,

Mary shouted at him. "Wait!" She disappeared inside her apartment, then reappeared with her coat and handbag. Edmund waited for her looking smug. She shot him a look of disgust. "You're aggravating."

He folded his arms, unconcerned. "Where are we going?"

Mary pushed the elevator button, wanting to punch it. "You'll see."

Moments later they sat on a bench in front of the building surrounded by the scent of roasted chicken from a local takeaway. Unfortunately, they were no closer to agreeing about his proposal than before.

Edmund sighed. "I wish you'd see reason."

"It's ethically wrong."

"No one would tie it back to you and, besides, I'm offering this as a gift."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she said sarcastically. "It shouldn't be difficult to believe a man who's so honest."

"I said I was sorry."

Mary looked at the contents of the envelope again. It was a magnificent offer and more tempting than before. He was too. Sitting on a bench had

been a bad idea. He sat as though he had no concept of personal space. His arm brushed hers each time he moved, sending unwanted shivers of desire racing through her, and she had to keep reminding herself how much she disliked him. Mary tried to inch away, but he always closed the distance, and if she moved anymore she'd fall off the bench.

Mary fought hard to focus on the brochure. It showed a happy older couple and described all the services and activities that were to be provided. She would love Mrs. McQueeth to live there. It would be an answer to a prayer. "Wait—I have an idea. Do you offer discounts?"

"For what?"

"The rooms. I'll pay a certain amount for Mrs. McQueeth's room and that will make it even."

"You can't afford it."

"Then make it affordable," she challenged.

He looked at her with admiration, then held out his hand. "You have yourself a deal."

She looked at his hand and shook her head. "This won't change anything. I will still watch your program like a hawk and will have an even bigger motive to make sure it succeeds the way that it should. Are you sure you still want to do this?"

He rested his arm behind her, his hand brushing the back of her neck when he did so. "I'm always sure of what I want."

Mary clasped her hands together, desperate not to move. "Oh."

"Don't move," he said, then reached for her shoulder. When he removed his hand a butterfly lay still on his finger. "Quick, make a wish."

"What?"

"Before it flies away."

I wish what I was feeling wasn't wrong. The butterfly took flight. Edmund watched it go and Mary watched him, until he turned to look at her. She glanced away.

"I have a question for you," he said in a low voice that sounded as sweet as honeysuckle.

She swallowed. "Yes?"

"What caused the change? Did you just turn forty or something?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm barely past thirty."

He playfully tugged on her hair. "I know. I was just teasing. Before you looked...uh..."

"Older?"

"Yes," he agreed, deciding to stay safe. "So why did you decide to do this...um...change?"

"It's called a makeover."

“Right.” He nodded as though he’d just learned a new word. “Makeover. Why did you do it?”

“Well, when you’ve been passed over for a promotion five times, thought of as the doormat project supervisor, and lost all your furniture to your ex because he owned most of it, you start taking stock of your life and decide you need a change.”

“So that’s why you won’t let me in.”

“What?”

“You don’t have any furniture left.”

“No, I have furniture now. I just didn’t want to let you in.”

“Is there any way I could get you to trust me?”

Probably. Despite his cool grayish-brown eyes, he was easy to talk to. And if she allowed herself, she would have to admit that she enjoyed his company. Her gaze fell to his soft full lips, remembering how they felt on hers. She quickly stopped herself. He wasn’t the man she’d imagined him to be. He wasn’t friendly and kind. Or at least she didn’t think so. He had a hidden agenda. She had to remember that. “No.”

“So who is Mrs. McQueeth to you?”

“An ex-nanny. She took care of my two brothers and me while we were growing up. Then I heard she’d fallen on hard times, and I

was determined to look after her as she had looked after us.”

“Why didn’t you get any money from your brothers?”

“They knew I could handle everything.”

“You probably didn’t ask them. I bet if you did, they would help.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Do you have siblings?”

“Just one. A sister.”

“Older or younger?”

“Younger.” He changed the subject. “So you’re beholden to your ex-nanny. I hope she appreciates you.”

“She does.” Mary paused, wishing he would move his arm. “Why do you do it?”

“What?”

“What you do. Why would you invest in a business like this? There must be other projects that are more exciting and more lucrative. You could invest in anything. Why this one?”

Edmund leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “My sister and I were raised by our grandparents, and I saw a lot of their friends end up in nursing homes and facilities that didn’t care about them. Eventually, we had to put my grandfather in one and...” His words fell away and he

shook his head, the pain of the memory evident in the tightness of his shoulders. Edmund took a deep breath and leaned back. "I vowed I'd come up with something better."

Mary didn't know what to say. She'd expected him to admit how much money he'd hoped to make, that he liked investing in sure things, not this poignant story of how he was raised. She sighed. Every time she managed to build up a shield against him he was able to slip through her armor. She didn't ask him what had happened to his parents or where his sister was now. All she said was, "Oh."

He turned to her. "Why do you say it like that?"

"I thought you were just in it for the money. There are a lot of seniors around nowadays."

"I'm not completely mercenary."

"Only partly?" she teased.

A grin spread on his face that made her heart do flip-flops. "Yes," he said.

"What's the other part?"

His gaze darkened to two smoldering pools. "Do you really want to know the answer?"

Yes. She made a noncommittal sound.

"Mary," he said her name softly, but it called to something deep within her. And she didn't want to answer the call. She leaped to her feet. The light

was fading and the thought of being alone with him in the dark conjured up too many possibilities. "I'd better go tell Mrs. McQueeth the great news."

Edmund slowly stood. "About that date—"

"Yes," she said in a bright voice. "That reminds me. I have to buy a pair of earrings for my date with Derrick."

He reached out and toyed with one of her earrings, the knuckles of his fingers touching her cheek like a caress. "I like what you're wearing right now."

Mary covered her ear, trying to ignore the electric sensation of his touch. "These are old. I bought them years ago."

"They're still beautiful." His large hand cupped the side of her face. "Do you know what else is beautiful?" His lips touched hers before she could respond, igniting all the delicious feelings he'd elicited before. She'd expected a kiss that overpowered her like a warrior claiming his battle prize, but his mouth claimed her with passionate mastery she felt powerless to resist. Her heart hammered in her chest as her mind told her to pull away. But her body sought comfort in the warm, solid body pressed against hers, the soft caress of his mouth, and she drew closer. Soon his arms

were around her, and her own hands cascaded over the muscles of his back. Her breathing grew shallow as their kiss deepened into something infinitely more dangerous.

Mary took a hasty step back. “No, we can’t do this.”

Edmund drew her close again. “Sure we can.”

She turned away from him, staring blindly at something in the distance. “No.”

He spun her to him. “Mary.”

She glanced up at the sky, unable to face him, knowing that if she did, she’d surrender again. “I’d better go.”

He reluctantly released her and shoved his hands in his pockets, looking grim. “Yes.”

She turned and hurried away.

Mrs. McQueeth was thrilled when Mary told her about the new arrangement. She was even more delighted a week later when she moved in. Edmund had selected a breathtaking one-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath, newly renovated apartment. A generous ray of light flooded the entryway through a skylight. Instead of drapes, there were simple bamboo shades, stained to echo the wood floors, and built-in shelving throughout to display

many of Mrs. McQueeth's precious family heirlooms. A beautiful rendition of a photograph of her mother and father hung over a stone fireplace. The cheery living room led to a small-size kitchen, which had all of the latest amenities and a dining area, where Mrs. McQueeth's mother's handmade dining table and chairs proudly took their place.

Her bedroom was twice the size of her old one and painted a soft lavender, Mrs. McQueeth's favorite. Her furniture was dwarfed by the immense space, but Mary could see that she felt at home.

Every apartment came equipped with all the latest technology. There was a specialized shower stall with a built-in chair, and recliners and beds that could be raised and lowered for residents with bad knees and backs. Mary moved around the apartment, speechless. She was a bit worried about all the high-tech equipment but couldn't deny that the place was lovely. This wasn't what she'd expected.

"How do you like it?" Edmund said, appearing in the doorway.

"What have you done?" Mary whispered so that Mrs. McQueeth wouldn't hear her.

"Don't you like it?"

"This isn't what we agreed to. You said 'affordable.'"

"This *is* affordable or rather it will be."

"She can't stay here."

Mrs. McQueeth came up to them with tears streaming down her face. "Oh, Mary, it's gorgeous." She hugged her. "I can't thank you enough."

"I'm sorry," Edmund said. "But there's been a mis—" Mary kicked him before he could finish.

"You're welcome," Mary said. "I hope you'll be happy here."

"I know I will be thanks to you." She took Edmund's hand. "I don't know what to say."

Edmund's face softened. He looked down at the older woman with a tenderness Mary found surprising. Then he lowered his voice and said something Mary couldn't hear, and she knew she wasn't meant to. The words were meant for Mrs. McQueeth alone. Whatever he said filled the woman with such joy, tears started to fall down her cheeks and she hugged him. "Bless you. God bless you," she said.

Mary expected Edmund to be embarrassed or impatient with Mrs. McQueeth's exuberant embrace, but he wasn't. He treated her as though he'd known her for years. Mary felt a little jealous at the ease with which he'd captured Mrs. McQueeth's affections, but she could see that winning women over was a talent of his.

“If you have any concerns there’s a list of numbers on the fridge and on the desk,” he said.

Mrs. McQueeth wiped her tears with a handkerchief.

“So what are you going to do first?” Mary asked.

Mrs. McQueeth went over to the large picture window. “I’m going to sit and enjoy the view.”

Edmund drew Mary away. “Then we won’t bother you.”

Mary began to protest, but he sent her a look that halted any attempt. “See you later,” she said. Once they closed the door, Mary looked at Edmund, annoyed, “I wanted more time with her.”

“And she wanted time alone. She needs the space to take it all in.”

Mary fell silent, then asked, “What did you say to her?”

He shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

She sent him a sly glance. “Which means you’re not going to tell me?”

The corner of Edmund’s mouth kicked up in a grin. “That’s right.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I do have one concern about the level of technology in her room.”

“It’s in all of the rooms. The residents like it. Don’t worry.”

“I am worried about its sophistication. Some of these people remember when there was only radio.”

“We have found that many of the residents are eager to use the technology and have adapted very quickly. We also have people who train those who feel uneasy, and the software is built to handle human error. Requests can be repeated a number of times to make sure that the computer understands them.”

“I see. And there’s another thing.”

“I thought you only had one concern.”

“Now I have two. I’m worried about the safety issue with regard to your idea of merging seniors with youthful family residents. How rigorous is the screening process?”

“Very rigorous. All of the family members go through a strict process before they are selected, and we do a background check for each to make sure there are no surprises.”

“And you have seen seniors improve with this ‘merging’ theory?”

“In many aging communities, the rate of depression is very high. Not so here. The residents

are content and happy. We have people heal faster following bouts of illness, surgeries or hospitalization. In addition, the rate of infections, hip fractures and other debilitating illness are at an all-time low among our residents. Also, their family members feel comfortable, and we have an extra support system just for caregivers so that they don't feel so overwhelmed and isolated. Take a close look at Gregory's reports, the evidence is all there."

"Hmm. Still, about the technology—do you think it's wise to have seniors deal with all these gadgets? The one in the shower looked complicated."

"Relax, Mary. If they ever have a problem, there's a person on call twenty-four hours a day."

They walked down the hall in silence. Then Mary noticed another wing. "What's down that hall?"

"Patients who need extra care."

"So you have a medical facility on the premises?"

"Yes."

"Must be costly with the risks and insurance involved."

"We manage."

"I'd like to see it."

Edmund glanced at his watch. "And I'd like to show it to you, but it will have to be another time." He gently took her arm and ushered her forward.

Mary got the distinct impression that there was something he didn't want her to know, and she intended to find out what.

Chapter 5

Mary was nervous about her date with Derrick. She had been fine when Larry and Sara had been around, but how would she be when she was alone? She hadn't been on a date in years. How should the new Mary act? What should she wear? The day of her date, that Friday, Mary called Sara at work and asked her to help her find something for that evening.

“Sorry,” Sara said. “But I have to work overtime. I’m sure you’ll look great in anything you choose.”

"I could still use your advice. I don't mind waiting until you get off work. You could help me with my makeup and what I should say."

"I wish I could, but I'm busy. I know you'll be fine. Just be yourself."

Unfortunately, Mary wasn't sure being herself was enough and couldn't help but feel a little betrayed that Sara couldn't find the time to help her. She sat at her desk, chewing her lip. What would The Black Stockings Society suggest? They had a Web site—perhaps that would offer tips. Mary typed in her special code, but the system wouldn't allow access. That evening, she went home frustrated. There was no one to help her. She stared at the clothes in her closet, then remembered Rania, the woman who'd helped her select them. She'd given her a card. Mary rifled through her purse until she found it, then called.

"I was wondering when I would hear from you," Rania said.

"You expected me to call?"

"Of course. Anytime. You're part of the Society now. It's like a sisterhood, and I'm your big sister. So how can I help you?"

"I have a date tonight, but I'm not quite sure what to wear."

“I’ll be over in an hour.”

Rania got there in thirty minutes and helped Mary with her makeup, and what to wear. First, she had Mary put on a full body stocking, which enhanced her form. She loved the feel against her body, and the off-black color made her skin look like sinful dark chocolate, ready for a naughty night.

Next, Rania selected a fitted knee-length blue wool dress with an attractive V-neck. After doing her makeup, which she decided needed to be soft, but sexy, Rania selected a pair of sterling-silver hoop earrings and a silver necklace. To finish off the outfit, she chose a pair of beige leather sling-back shoes. Mary looked in the mirror and marveled at the woman who stared back at her. She was ready for the night.

“He won’t be able to take his eyes off you,” Rania said, admiring the finished product.

“Thank you.” Mary hesitated. “You’ve been very helpful. This is great. Is there a way to nominate a friend so they could join? I have a friend who would love to be a part of this.”

Rania’s face became guarded. “The Black Stockings Society is by *invitation only*.”

“Is there a way my friend can get one?”

“Have you told your friend anything?”

“No.”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

“But—”

“There are no *buts*, those are the rules. You knew them when you signed the contract.”

“It just seems unfair. She’s a good friend of mine. When my ex-boyfriend, Curtis, left with all the furniture, she gave me the extras she had in her basement.”

Rania went into the living room and lifted the covering off the couch. She quickly dropped it. She sent Mary a curious look. “How close a friend is she?”

“My best friend.”

“And she gave you her leftovers.”

“No, she—”

“These are ugly.” Rania walked over to one of the lamps. “What is this?”

“An antler lamp.”

She frowned. “I was afraid of that.” She shook her head in disgust. “Mary, you don’t need to be thankful for anyone’s scraps anymore. Remember the oath?”

Mary’s heart constricted with panic. “Sorry. I didn’t memorize it. Was I supposed to?” She turned. “Let me go find my folder.”

Before she could leave, Rania grabbed her arm. "Mary, sit down and listen to me."

Mary sat and waited.

"As a member of The Black Stockings Society I swear I will not reveal club secrets, I will accept nothing but the best and I will no longer settle for less. Now repeat that."

Mary did; Rania nodded, pleased.

"I promise I will follow the oath, but you have to understand that Sara and her husband were being kind when they gave me their furniture. She really is a good person and has been with me through some rough times."

"Uh-huh," Rania said, looking doubtful.

"So you don't know how people get nominated?"

"No, I'm just part of the Society. I don't run the show. I don't know *how* someone is chosen or *who* will get an invitation. It just happens. If your friend doesn't get one, then she's not meant to, and if she's a real friend she'll be happy to see your life improve."

"Right," Mary said, although it didn't feel that way. "How long have you been a member?"

"A few years."

"Do you know who started it?"

"No one really knows, but from what I've heard

a rich, reclusive woman only known as Ms. Dorathe started the Society back in the seventies.”

“Is she still alive?”

Rania shrugged.

“Do you know how many members there are?”

“No one knows that, either. There could be hundreds or thousands.”

“And members can’t nominate anyone?”

Rania sighed and shook her head. “One thing you’ll learn, Mary, is the more you help yourself, the better you can help others. Understand?”

Mary nodded, although she didn’t understand at all.

That evening Mary made her way through a thick summer heat and arrived early at the restaurant Derrick had selected. She ordered a drink to pass the time, impressed by the extravagant decor. She nursed that drink for a half hour, then an hour. When she’d finally decided that Derrick wasn’t coming, he came through the door and sat at the table. He looked more dressed for a business meeting than a dinner date, and Mary had the sinking suspicion he hadn’t changed since leaving work.

“Mary, I’m sorry,” he said, then kissed her on the cheek. “I had to get some things done at the office. Hope you’re not mad.”

Hope you're not mad. How familiar that sounded. In different forms so many people had said that to her—James, Dianne, Curtis, now Derrick. The horrible thing was they didn't expect her to be. But this time she *was* mad. She was mad that he'd kept her waiting and had walked into the restaurant expecting her to be there, when he could have had the decency to call and tell her about his delay. Curtis had done the same thing. He'd always had something more important he had to do. Even though she looked like the new Mary, Derrick was treating her like the old one. Safe, dependable Mary who wouldn't get upset no matter how badly she was treated. That Mary was gone, and the new Mary was leaving.

She stood.

"Do you have to go to the ladies' room?" Derrick asked.

Mary pushed in her chair. "No."

"Then where are you going?"

"Home."

Derrick stared at her in shock. "But I told you I had to work."

"Yes, and I believe you, but I've been down this road before and I don't like the journey." She turned on her heel and marched away.

Mary didn't go home. That would be too de-

pressing—she'd just be reminded that her new look and stockings had been wasted, but she didn't know where else to go. She kept driving aimlessly around and before she knew it she was near The New Day Senior Living Community. She decided to visit Mrs. McQueeth and see how she was settling in. She soon discovered that Mrs. McQueeth was settling in quite well.

"I have a date," she said when Mary asked her why she was all dressed up.

"A date?"

"Yes, they're having a party in the main hall. You could come along if you want."

"No, I'd better go home."

"At least stay awhile for the food. The meals here are sinful and you could stuff yourself until your buttons pop. Besides, I would like you to meet some of my new friends. Mary, you look so beautiful I want to show you off."

It would be better than sitting home alone.
"Okay."

Mary helped Mrs. McQueeth put on her double-strand pearl necklace and wrapped her in a white woolen shawl, then they headed out. The large meeting hall burst with color, displaying large pots of flowing plumage. Miniature white lights framed

the windows, and large burgundy, velvet curtains draped the windows. Over to one side of the hall stood a long table laden with an assortment of food as a live band played music from the forties and fifties. An unusual assortment of couples crowded the dance floor: women dancing with women, male and female residents dancing with well-dressed college-aged students, and a sprinkling of children under the age of ten practicing their latest dance steps.

It was obvious that Mrs. McQueeth was very popular, and she proudly introduced Mary to all of her friends. After several dances, everyone piled their plates with food and chatted about how much they enjoyed the community. Some of the men asked Mary to dance. She obliged and soon the disappointment of her date with Derrick faded away.

“Aren’t you a little young for this crowd?” a familiar voice asked.

Mary slowly turned to see Edmund, who looked stunning in a dark blue-gray suit. She tried to ignore a shiver of delight. “Not at all. I turned sixty-seven Tuesday.”

He smiled. “Happy belated birthday. May I have this dance?” He pulled her into his arms before she could reply.

There was nothing obscene about the way he held her, but her traitorous body was enjoying it in a way that was far from decent. "You know it's customary to wait for an answer."

"I don't wait when the answer is 'yes.'"

Mary rolled her eyes. "Did it take you long to grow this arrogant?"

"Did it take you long to grow this beautiful?"

She tilted her head. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

He drew her closer. "I'm already where I want to be."

She lowered her head, embarrassed.

He lifted her chin, a devilish gleam in his eyes. "It's not like you to have nothing to say."

"I don't know how to respond to a pass."

"It was a compliment. I've been watching you for some time. I wasn't sure when to approach you. At my age you become cautious."

Her eyes twinkled. "And just how old would you be?"

"Seventy-three."

"And you still have all your hair."

"And teeth."

"Quite a catch."

"Thank you." He slid his hand down her backside.

She returned his hand to her waist. "You're welcome."

"Yes, my grandkids worry about me. They're afraid women will be after me for my money."

"Do you have a lot of it?"

"Enough to garner interest. My wife Martha and I—"

"*Martha?* Your wife's name is Martha? Who are you, George Washington?"

"I'm Eugene Stokes." He gently squeezed her. "And careful, I get upset when people make fun of my wife's name."

Mary smothered a laugh. "I'm sorry."

"It might sound plain and ordinary to you, but she was the most loyal, stable, kind woman I knew, and I cherished every day I was with her."

To her annoyance Mary found herself envious of this mythical Martha, then realized this was all make-believe. "That's wonderful."

"She helped me with my work. We owned a couple of businesses that we later divided between our two sons."

"How long were you married?"

"Thirty-five years. I didn't marry until my thirties. What about you?"

"I never married. I'm independently wealthy."

He frowned. "You never married?"

"No, but I've had quite a few lovers in my day."

His gaze melted into hers. "You're not too old to have many more."

She felt her mouth go dry.

"Or, perhaps, one in particular."

"Maybe."

"I have a theory that you should never stop living until you're dead." His hand skimmed down to her hip, and she felt a thrill tremble through her, escalating as his hand descended. She felt as though he'd removed her dress to reveal the stockings she wore underneath. "And you're certainly not dead."

She drew back, struggling to tame the warmth that gathered between her legs, in response to his masculine scent and expert hands. "I'd better go."

He lowered his voice to a tone that shouldn't have been heard in the crush of people and the music of the live band, but its soft power made every other sound fade away and his velvet tone was all she heard when he spoke. "I think it's time you stop running away from me." He lowered his head and whispered, "You can't deny what we feel for each other."

"I can."

He placed a finger on the base of her throat and

left a sensuous trail down to the V of her dress, causing the heat at her center to build.

She grabbed his hand. "I have to."

"Why?"

"Because I'm different now. The old Mary was attracted to you, but I'm the new Mary now. I don't want to repeat the same old pattern. You'd run over me. You wouldn't be able to help yourself and I might let you. We're wrong for each other."

He pulled her back into his arms and hugged her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm hugging you."

"Why?"

"Because if I kiss you I may not be able to control myself, and there are kids in the room."

"Oh."

He lowered his voice again, his breath warm against her ear. "Doesn't this feel right to you?"

It felt perfect. "No." Mary struggled to free herself. "Please let me go."

He didn't move and for a second she feared he wouldn't let go, and she wouldn't force him to. Then he reluctantly released her. "It won't work."

"What?"

"Fighting this attraction between us. Denying it won't make it go away."

His smug tone made her more defiant. "I'm not going to be anyone's stable-and-steady companion. I'm not going to be anyone's Martha. You'll have to find that woman somewhere else." Mary turned on her heel and left Edmund standing alone in the middle of the dance floor.

Moments later, Mary sat in her car, staring at the lights from the hall. She wanted to go back, but she knew she had to stay away. Derrick had been a perfect example of why her taste in men had to change. For a moment, she closed her eyes and hugged herself, remembering Edmund's embrace, the soft feel of his shirt against her cheek, the scent of his skin and the solid heat of his form pressed against hers. Then she sighed and opened her eyes, trying to push the memory away but failing. She started her car and drove home. If he felt the way she did, perhaps they could work something out.

Perhaps he was right. She couldn't fight it and there could be some victory in surrender. She didn't want to marry him, after all. He could be a transitional affair—she'd use him to get him out of her system, and then she'd move on. Mary walked to her apartment with growing hope, but a note under her door soon sent her crashing back to earth.

Chapter 6

“**Y**ou’re not renewing my lease?” Mary said to the leasing agent. His name was Nigel Harris, and he had the most pristine brown goatee Mary had ever seen, but he smelled of pickles and mayonnaise. His office was far too neat to be of any real purpose, and she wondered what he did all day.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“But I can pay.”

He clasped his hands together and rested them on the desk. “Unfortunately, now that your boyfriend no longer lives with you, you don’t qualify

for this apartment. You're not at the right income level. It's a new policy. You can stay for another thirty days."

Mary crossed her legs and glanced skyward. "I don't believe this."

The man's voice changed to something indulgent. "However, we may be able to get around it."

She looked at him, catching his gaze fall to her fishnet-clad legs. "How?"

"If you'd like to discuss it somewhere a little more private I could be very obliging."

"Oh, really?"

He swallowed. "Yes."

She stood.

"Where are you going?"

"To throw up." She swung open the door. "The sight of you makes me sick."

The next day Mary set off early in the morning to find who she could stay with until she found a new place. She didn't want to stay with her brothers—one lived in a dump, and the other had an obnoxious seven-year-old she had the misfortune of calling her niece. She had an aunt who lived in Maryland also, but it would be a two-hour commute from her place to work.

As the weeks dwindled down into days, Mary began to panic. She called Rania, but she'd gone on vacation and couldn't be reached. Three days before she had to move, she decided to call Sara although they hadn't spoken in a while.

"I would love to help you," Sara said. "But we loaned our extra room to Larry's nephew."

Mary's throat tightened with tears. She had nowhere else to turn. In three days she would be out on the street. "Okay."

"Mary, I feel awful."

"I'll be okay," Mary said in a bright voice as tears slid down her cheeks. "Don't worry about me." She hung up the phone and wiped her tears. "Damn you, Curtis." The stress of finding a new place had affected her work, as well. Twice she'd forgotten crucial appointments, she was behind on handing in an important document for review and Dianne had had to reprimand her when she'd lost a key to the office conference room.

Mary paced her apartment, seeing the dreams of her promotion fading away. She hadn't had time to look over the weekly reports Gregory had sent her, and her quarterly report to James was due in two days. No doubt Edmund would be pleased with her lack of focus, but she had to get

organized. She had to think. She had to find a place to live.

That evening Mary baked cookies and visited Mrs. McQueeth. The moment the older woman saw her she knew something was wrong. "Who died?"

"Nobody died."

She took the cookies from Mary. "Well, something must have happened or you wouldn't be wearing that expression and carrying enough cookies to feed the Army and the Marines."

Mary sat down in the large recliner. When it started to shake, she leaped to her feet. "What's going on?"

Mrs. McQueeth hurried over. "You must have touched something." She pushed a few buttons and the shaking stopped.

"I don't think that chair is safe," Mary said staring at it with distrust.

"It's okay. I had trouble at first, but they showed me how to use everything and they were very patient when I didn't understand. You can sit down now and tell me what's wrong."

Mary decided to sit on a straight-back wooden chair instead. "I have to move out of my apartment within three days, and I don't know where I'll go."

"You can stay with me."

Mary smiled with regret. "You're very sweet, but that wouldn't be appropriate."

"Why not?"

"Because as the project supervisor, I have to be objective about this place, and if I stayed here then I couldn't be."

"Perhaps you could say that you're doing a special report. That you want to see how the residents are really living. And don't forget, part of this new way of living is allowing a select family member or friend to live in the community near to their special 'senior.'"

Mary bit into a cookie and chewed thoughtfully. "That's not a bad idea. I could stay here for a couple of months while I'm looking for more permanent housing. That way I could stay on top of my work obligations, without having to worry about finding a place to live right now."

"I'm sure that something will come up for you after a month or so. Just tell Mr. Davis of your plan, and that I need you close by."

"You mean tell Mr. Trent."

Mrs. McQueeth sent her a knowing look she'd used when Mary was a little girl. "No, I don't."

Mary squirmed in her seat. "I couldn't go to see him." *I'm supposed to stay away from him.*

“If you put it the way I told you to, he won’t know anything. He’s a man with property. Ask him. You can’t lose.”

“How do you know that?”

Mrs. McQueeth’s mouth spread into a smug grin. “Because I know he’ll say yes.”

Edmund stared at Mary incredulously. “You want to stay in one of our residences?”

“Yes.”

His main office suited him: clean, efficient, practical, with expensive but understated furniture. Located only a half hour from the community, it allowed Edmund easy access to his biggest investment. Although Mary thought his office reflected him, she found it odd that she couldn’t find a single family picture, or a picture of any sort, in the room. Instead, he had a collection of snow globes that lined his desk and bookshelves.

“For a month?”

Maybe more. “Yes.”

“That’s not usually done, is it? I mean a program supervisor—”

“No,” she quickly agreed, wishing she’d been able to schedule time to speak with him sooner. She’d been forced to leave all of her furniture be-

hind in the apartment because she hadn't wanted to pay to put them in storage. But now all her personal belongings lay stacked in her car, likely roasting in the summer heat. Fortunately, Mrs. McQueeth had agreed to look after Cammie, but if she couldn't convince Edmund of her plan she and Cammie would be calling her car "home." She had a love-hate relationship with her car. It made strange noises when on the road but continued to move.

"And what exactly would you do?"

Mary licked her lips, trying to remember what she'd rehearsed with Mrs. McQueeth. "I've decided that since this project is about the total living experience that seniors will have, I'd like to live on-site for, let's say a month, to see it for myself. I will monitor how things actually work. I won't be there all the time, of course. I have other projects."

He leaned back in his chair. "I'm listening."

"I would pay, I hope, a reduced fee for a unit and a nominal fee for any of the services I use."

He folded his arms.

A cold knot tightened in her stomach and the silence in the room made her skin feel as though it was being stretched from her bones. She couldn't tell anything by looking at his face. She didn't

know whether she'd convinced him that her idea was good or crazy. "What do you think?"

"I think it's unnecessary. I'm eager to prove to anyone the benefits of this new community, but you don't need to live there."

Mary resisted the urge to fall on her knees and beg. No, she wouldn't beg. She was above begging.

"Edmund—"

He raised his hand. "I have an idea. I have an apartment building not far from here where you can stay."

"Okay."

He drew his eyebrows together. "You don't sound pleased."

"I am. Thank you. So when will a unit be ready?"

"When do you need one?"

Tonight. "When one is available?"

He lifted one of the snow globes and turned it upside down, then right-side up and watched the snowflakes fall on a city scene. "You're not telling me something."

A drop of sweat developed on her forehead, despite the cool air from the air conditioner. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you don't lie very well." He set the

snow globe down and returned his gaze to her face. "But if you need a place immediately, I have a place you can move into right away."

"I'll take it."

"But you don't know where it is."

"I don't care—" she burst out, then quickly added "—as long as it's close to the community."

"It's close."

She paused. "And it's not your place."

Edmund began to smile. "It's not my place."

Mary relaxed. "That's all I need to know."

"Fine. My assistant will help you with all the paperwork."

Mary wasn't prepared for Edmund's assistant—an older man named Dion with a knife tattooed on his neck, a Mediterranean tan and a physique better suited for a barroom than a business. But Dion was efficient and went through all the paperwork with her. She glanced at the pages without reading every word as she usually did. But when Dion showed her the apartment, she was certain there had been a mistake. The furnished two-bedroom unit was worth three times the agreed-upon rent and had a breathtaking view of the city. Mary moved in immediately.

That night she prepared a special meal for

Cammie of collard, turnip and dandelion greens with small pieces of grapes, mango and melon. Cammie ate it as though she hadn't eaten in days, and Mary ordered in Italian. After dinner, she stood out on the balcony and inhaled the cool scent of the coming rain that hung in the air.

"What do you think?"

Mary gripped the railing and spun to see Edmund standing on the balcony next to hers. She grabbed her robe, holding it tightly so she wouldn't reveal the satin blue bra and panty underneath. Although his gaze made it seem as though he could.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here." He winked. "Sleep tight, neighbor," he said, then disappeared inside.

Chapter 7

Mary couldn't sleep that night. She tried not to imagine Edmund eating, watching TV or possibly *showering* only a few feet away. She would be an adult about this. They could be neighbors and she'd be cordial when she saw him, which turned out to be more often than she'd hoped. He had an uncanny knack of leaving his apartment at *exactly* the same time she did. She'd see him in the hallway, in the elevator, in the lobby. But she was determined to remain cool, if friendly.

Mary still considered starting an affair but

thought that an affair with a neighbor would provide unnecessary complications. Besides, she had to rebuild her damaged reputation at work, and she did so by going over, with undue earnest, the reports Gregory had given her. She wasn't pleased with what she read and scheduled another meeting with Gregory. For this meeting she wore metallic, thigh-high stockings and a red-hot suit.

"This is not acceptable," she told him.

Gregory looked at the reports in her hand. "What do you mean it's not acceptable?"

"It's lacking. I had expected more from you."

"I followed the guidelines."

"To the barest minimum." Mary tapped the reports. "This doesn't tell me anything. When you asked for funding I'm sure your proposal showed more passion."

"I'm not writing a damn novel—this is a report."

"And your reports have to demonstrate that this project is one of the best ideas our organization has ever funded. Instead, it will make people question us. You have left out key points."

"Couldn't you have told me all of the specifics you wanted before?"

"I'm sorry. My schedule was packed. Don't worry, I won't have you rewrite all of them."

Gregory nearly flew out of his seat. "I have to rewrite them?"

"I want this project to be one of the best."

"It is."

"Then write about it." She stood. "I know you can make this work."

Gregory nodded. "Right." He watched her go, then called Edmund. "I thought you were handling her."

"What?"

"For weeks I've gotten by, and then today she comes into my office telling me I have to rewrite my reports. Not *all*," he said bitterly, "just *some*."

"Calm down."

"Calm down? Do you know how much damn time I'm going to have to waste on these? And if she's starting to look closely at them, what other things will she start looking closely at?"

"I'll talk to her."

"I don't care what you do as long as you get her off my back."

Somehow Mary wasn't surprised to see Edmund when she entered the lobby of her apartment complex that evening. He stood by the elevator doors.

“Hello,” she said.

“What’s wrong with the reports?”

“I explained everything to Gregory.”

“And now you’ll explain everything to me.”

“I don’t have time.”

“It will only take a few minutes.”

The elevator arrived and they stepped inside.

“He needs more data,” Mary said. “I want hard facts. Numbers. He’s doing the minimum and he knows it.”

“And you want him to rewrite some of the reports?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t he just write something more in his next report?”

“No.”

“Is this about your promotion?”

“No. Strangely, I like this project and I want to see it succeed. Plus I have a vested interest, if you remember.”

“I remember.”

“Any more questions?”

“Yes, have you ever made love in an elevator?”

Her breath caught. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said in a low, smooth voice like hot cream poured over bread pudding.

"I've never even thought about it." Her nervous fingers toyed with the strap of her handbag. "Have you?"

Edmund loosened his tie. "No, but I've always wanted to give it a try."

"Oh."

He rested a hand behind her head and leaned toward her, his eyes like two shiny coins that could hypnotize. She didn't know how he managed it, but those steely grayish-brown eyes no longer reminded her of the Arctic. She thought of steel melting under an intense heat, and she felt that heat all over, her nipples becoming taut and her skin hot to the touch. "Interested?" he said.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Edmund turned to the small crowd waiting to enter. "This car is full," he said. The stunned crowd watched the doors close.

Mary stared at him in shock. "I'm not going to make love to you in an elevator."

"Maybe not," he said, his gaze unwavering.

"Definitely not," she said, wanting to tear her gaze away but not finding the strength to.

"But you *are* going to kiss me." His mouth swooped down to capture hers. Any protest fell away like parchment paper under a hot flame.

She couldn't resist him any longer. Even if she could, she didn't want to. She wanted him with a desire so hot it startled her. She'd never wanted someone like this before. At last she could make the fantasies she'd had of the "stranger in the elevator" come true. He was better than she'd imagined. She hadn't expected his hands to feel as smooth as baby oil against her body. Or that the sound of his fingers lowering the zipper of her skirt could be as intoxicating as the most expensive champagne. She unbuttoned his shirt like a starving woman unwrapping a muffin and took pleasure in his bare chest as though he were a batch fresh from the oven.

They didn't notice when the elevator stopped on their floor. They kissed all the way back down to the ground level and up again.

When the elevator reached their floor again Mary said, "We can't keep doing this."

Edmund slipped his hand under her blouse. "Yes, we can."

She pulled away from him and opened the doors before they descended again. "No, we can't."

He followed her out as though he were being dragged to the gallows. "We could have."

She took his hand. "But we can do so much more at your place."

His pace increased. "That's true."

Edmund eagerly put the key into his apartment door, but it wouldn't open. He swore. Mary noticed the blue flashlight on the keychain. "I think those are mine."

"Oh, right." He handed her keys back to her, then dug into his trouser pockets, grabbed *his* keys and opened the door. They barely made it inside before they turned to each other, determined to finish what they'd started. Clothes fell unnoticed as they made their way to the bedroom. They didn't make it there. Mary darted her tongue in Edmund's ear and he stumbled to the floor, taking her down with him. Mary's skin was so hot that the cool wooden floor against her back came as a relief. The abstract painting above his head—bold variations of red colliding—was an apt depiction of her emotions, replicating the excitement unleashed within her.

The magnificence of his form pressed against her, and his touch, stirred up wanton and wild feelings. "I never dreamed it would be like this."

"I did," he said in a deep, husky tone.

She smiled. "You dreamed about me?"

"Yes, and I dreamed about doing this." He started to pull down her thigh-high stockings then stopped.

“Is there a problem?”

“These weren’t part of my dream. I’ve never seen anything like these.” He slipped his hand underneath the stockings, the back of his hand brushing against the bare skin of her thighs. The metallic sparkling hose was Mary’s most sensuous pair. Edmund shook his head in wonder. “Of all the women I’ve—”

Mary smiled. “It’s okay. I know I’m not the first.”

He raised his gaze and captured hers, his voice full of feeling. “There are other firsts, Mary, and you’re definitely one of them.”

Mary didn’t remember Edmund’s removing her stockings or her panties, but she did remember his smooth entrance and the sensations that followed. Nothing was off-limits, and he seized the opportunity to take advantage of every part of her.

“Oh, Mary, Mary, Mary.”

Could he truly be calling her? She never thought her name could sound so sexy. That she could feel this good. This lucky. A flash of fear gripped her as she thought of her past unlucky relationships. She held onto him as though he would disappear in an instant, bringing him closer, and she tightened around him, eliciting a deep moan of pleasure.

“You feel so good.”

Mary pushed away her fears and let herself go. Her complete surrender drove him wild. Edmund felt intoxicated by the gift she gave to him, and a fierce possessiveness took hold of him. It was as if it was the first time for both of them. She was his woman now. When they finished, he collapsed on his back and stared up at the ceiling, his arm still holding her to him.

“I’m starving,” he grumbled.

Mary stopped smiling and jumped up. “Oh, no.” She gathered her clothes and quickly pulled them on.

Edmund watched her, worried. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to feed Cammie.”

“Bring her over. We can have dinner together.”

“You’re going to cook?”

“No, I’m going to dial the phone. What would you like?”

“Anything. I’ll be right back.” Mary dashed to her apartment. She began to take Cammie out of her cage, then thought better of it. Edmund might not like a lizard crawling all over his furniture. She grabbed Cammie’s food and her carrier, then left her apartment.

“What’s that?” Edmund asked when she returned.

“An iguana.” She set the cage down on his coffee table.

Edmund sat on the couch and stared at the carrier. "I thought Mary was supposed to have a little lamb."

"Well, this Mary has a lizard. She makes a great pet and is clean. I let her roam all the time."

"Okay, take her out then."

"Really?" Mary said, lifting the top of the carrier. "I didn't think you'd like it."

"I'm curious. Does she like to be touched?"

"She loves it." Mary took Cammie out of her carrier. Cammie crawled up the couch, then onto Edmund's lap, up his arm and then rested on his shoulder. "Cammie, get down from there."

"It's okay." He touched Cammie's head. "I'll pretend I'm a pirate."

"Pirates have parrots on their shoulders, not lizards."

"I'm a different kind of pirate."

She rested her hands on her hips. "What kind of pirate are you?"

"A land pirate."

"And what do you like to steal?"

He winked. "You'll find out when you discover something missing."

Whatever kind of pirate he claimed to be, Edmund was doing a very good imitation with his

wicked eyes and enigmatic grin. She hardly knew this man, and she'd just slept with him and wanted to all over again.

The doorbell rang, the arrival of their dinner breaking the mood. The rest of the evening, they ate Taiwanese on the balcony. Mary had suggested the couch, but Edmund argued that he preferred to look at her, rather than the TV. She had no reply. So, among the lights from the stars and the city below, they ate and talked until the stream of cars became only a trickle. Around 1:00 a.m. Mary stifled a yawn.

"You can spend the night," Edmund said when Mary announced that it was time for her to leave.

She placed Cammie in her cage. "I save sleepovers for the weekend."

He stood behind her and placed a kiss on her neck. "I'm going to have to change that."

"I'm open to persuasion—" she drew away when he wrapped an arm around her waist "—but not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because I have work tomorrow."

"So do I. I'll let you sleep." He held up three fingers as though he were a Boy Scout saying a pledge. "I promise."

She opened the door. "No."

"Fine. I'll walk you home."

"I just live next door."

"I want to make sure you get there safely."

Mary only shook her head. They walked over to her apartment. Once inside, she turned to him.

"Thanks."

"I don't get a good-night kiss?"

"No."

He rested a hand on his chest as though he'd been wounded. "I think you just broke my heart."

"Then I'll heal it tomorrow."

His face brightened and he drew her close, holding her tightly against him. "Why wait until tomorrow?"

She playfully pushed him away. "Goodbye, Edmund," she said, then closed the door.

"Good night, Mary," he said, his voice muffled. "Pleasant dreams."

Mary slept well that night. Too well. She overslept. The next morning she grabbed her clothes and pulled on a tam before dashing off to work. But the day didn't improve much from there. She couldn't focus. Everything she looked at reminded her of the night before. The steam from the coffeepot reminded her of Edmund's passion;

the chocolate-covered donuts left over from a recent business meeting reminded her of the delectable taste of his skin; instead of a modern carving of ebony stone, she saw Edmund's firm body, and... "Do you have the files completed yet?" Mary looked up, flustered. She had been totally unaware that James had been standing in front of her desk.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got an important phone call I had to take care of. I'll get them to you right away." Mary hurriedly found the items she had promised to deliver; when she was done it was already noon.

At lunch she was horrified to find that she'd put on two different shoes. She was returning to her desk when she saw Edmund down the hall outside James's office. She froze. Why did he have to stop by her office *today*?

He glanced at her before she had a chance to duck out of view. She smiled, but he showed no sign of recognizing her before turning back to James. She felt like crumbling to the floor. Perhaps he hadn't seen her. *Oh, please let it be that. Don't let him ignore me.* In high school and college, people would be nice to her in class but when they saw her on campus or in the hallway she didn't exist. She sat down at her desk and got back to work. She

wouldn't make a big deal of it. She reapplied her makeup, then deliberately walked past them.

"Mary," James said.

She turned and faced him.

Edmund handed her a file. "Gregory wanted me to give this to you."

There was nothing in his gaze to hint at what had happened between them last night.

"Thank you," she said briskly. He had the right attitude, she told herself, trying not to feel rebuffed. They couldn't broadcast their relationship—whatever it was—to everyone. However, her hand still trembled as she took the folder. "I'll look at it today." She turned.

"Mary, are you all right?" Jean asked when Mary stumbled into the water cooler.

"I'm fine," she snapped. She forced a smile. "I'd better get back to work." She sat at her desk and slammed the folder down. Why couldn't she be as unattached as he was? What had she expected? An embrace? That would have been totally unprofessional. Business was business. She opened Gregory's folder, then closed it, feeling too restless to focus. She lifted her mug and went to the office kitchen. There she saw Edmund pouring himself a cup of coffee. She pretended to ignore him.

But it proved difficult to ignore someone like Edmund. Mary watched helplessly as a female colleague of hers noticed him and tried very hard to get *him* to notice *her*. “Could you pass me the sugar?” she asked him.

“Sure.” He handed her the sugar and Mary saw their fingers touch. She inhaled her drink and began to cough.

“Are you okay?” her colleague asked.

Mary waved away her concern and choked, “I’m fine. Excuse me.” She turned to leave.

Edmund called out to her. “Have you looked at the file?”

“I’m going to.” Mary returned to her desk. She wasn’t jealous and she wasn’t annoyed. She didn’t care how he was with other women. She opened Gregory’s folder and between two papers discovered a dried rose, its crimson petals still soft. She lifted the rose and held it to her chest, then set it down. She discreetly put on some lipstick and kissed a paper just as Dianne walked past. “I’m just removing any excess color,” she explained. Dianne looked unsure but left. Mary quickly folded the paper, placed it in an envelope and rushed to the elevator before Edmund stepped inside. “Please look this over.”

Edmund took the envelope and stuck it inside his jacket. "I will."

Mary was giddy the rest of the day. When she got home she changed into a two-piece, silk pant set that she felt certain would become Edmund's favorite, then went to his apartment and knocked. Nobody answered. She was about to leave when someone spun her around and kissed her. "That's my reply," Edmund said.

"You got my kiss."

"And you got my rose."

"It's beautiful."

He opened his door. "I'll buy you live ones if you stay the night."

"Pink and yellow?"

He pulled out his mobile. "Just say the word."

Mary slept over that night and many nights after. Soon Cammie got used to staying at Edmund's apartment. Unlike Curtis, Cammie liked Edmund and he returned the affection. He liked her so much that he went out and bought several books and researched all he could about caring for an iguana. One day he surprised Mary by creating an elaborate cage in his spare room that he filled with large tropical plants, which Cammie loved. Any time Mary was ready to leave, Cammie would scurry off

and hide in a corner where she couldn't be reached and so became Edmund's permanent resident.

A month later, Mary followed Cammie's example and she and Edmund settled into a routine. Because he usually arrived after her, Mary prepared dinner and he made dessert. Mary felt comfortable with him, although at times she still felt he was hiding something.

One evening she saw him looking over some papers that had The New Day Senior Living Community marked on them. When she called him for dinner, she saw him jump and quickly shove the papers in his briefcase, which he locked. But Mary wasn't too concerned. She'd done a thorough check on the community and hadn't found anything to question in any of the reports.

A few days later, Edmund arrived home and found Mary putting Cammie in the bathtub. "What are you doing?"

"Giving Cammie a bath. I've told you it's very important. I do it every day. It helps stop the shedding. I got home a little late or I would have been done already."

"Right, I forgot," he said distractedly. "Well, when you're done I want to show you something."

Mary finished Cammie's bath, then went to

Edmund, who was sitting in the living room.
“What is it?”

He jumped up. “Get your coat.”

She didn’t ask why, although he didn’t give her a chance to. He whistled to himself as they went down in the elevator and as they left the building. Autumn temperatures gripped the city and brought a gust of wind. Edmund handed Mary a pair of keys and pointed to a car in the distance. “Enjoy.”

Mary stared at the black luxury car. “That’s mine?” She raced to the car and jumped inside. “I don’t believe this,” she said, starting the ignition.

“You deserve it.”

She merged onto the main road, reveling in the car’s pickup. “I can’t believe you’d do this. You haven’t known me that long.”

“It’s been three months now.”

She turned to him with surprise. “Really? It doesn’t feel that long.”

“That’s a good sign. Are you happy?”

“Of course I’m happy. How could you think otherwise?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I just thought—”

“I’m only surprised our affair has lasted this long.”

“Our affair?” he said in a neutral tone.

“Yes, that’s what we have, right?” When he didn’t reply right away, she glanced at him curiously. “Edmund?”

“Yes, that’s what we have.”

She sighed, relieved. “We’re having so much fun there’s no need to put any pressure on each other.”

Edmund rested his arm on the door frame.

Mary ran her hands along the leather-clad steering wheel. “Sara won’t be able to believe this.”

“Who’s Sara?”

“A friend of mine.”

“I haven’t heard you talk about her before.”

“I’ve been busy,” she hedged. “I haven’t had a chance to catch up with her or Larry, her husband.”

“You should invite them over. I’d like to meet them.”

Mary gripped the steering wheel. “Why?”

“You don’t want me to meet your friends?”

“No, it’s not that.” She didn’t know why she felt hesitant—perhaps she liked keeping Edmund to herself. But there was nothing to worry about. *What could go wrong?* “Okay.” She drove for a while, then said, “What do you give the man who has everything?”

“What do you mean?”

She drove into a residential area and parked, then

turned to him. "I mean how do you thank a man for a surprise like this? What do you give him?"

"You don't have to give him anything."

"Isn't there anything that you want that I can give you?"

He opened his mouth as though ready to reveal his greatest desire, then closed it and shook his head. "No, I'm happy as long as you're happy."

"That's not good enough. I'll have to think of something."

What she thought of was a feast of all his favorite dishes and dressing up as his *personal waitress*. Edmund took one look at her and had no interest in food. Two hours later, all of the dishes had to be reheated, but Edmund didn't complain.

"You need to relax," Edmund said as he watched Mary dash from the kitchen to the dining table and back again as she prepared for the arrival of Sara and Larry.

"I just want everything to be nice."

"Everything looks great and smells even better. What are you cooking?"

She jumped when someone rang the doorbell. "They're here."

"Why are you so nervous?"

She struggled to untie her apron. "I hope you'll like them." She turned her back to him and motioned to her knotted string. "Help me with this."

He undid the knot. "I'm sure I will like them."

She pulled off the apron and folded it. "I hope they like you."

"Why wouldn't they?"

Mary bit her lower lip, thinking it best not to reply. She handed him the apron. "Please, put that away for me. Coming," she called when the bell rang again. She opened the door with a smile. "It's wonderful to see you."

Larry gave a low whistle as he entered the apartment. Sara followed behind him, speechless. They were equally dumbfounded when Mary introduced Edmund. He smiled and shook their hands, then led them to the living room.

Mary raced back and forth to the kitchen, getting appetizers and drinks, until Edmund grabbed her wrist and forced her to sit.

"You've got a great place," Larry said.

Mary sat back, trying to relax. "Thanks to Edmund. He gave me a great deal."

Sara sipped her drink. "If only we all could be so lucky as to sleep with our landlords."

Edmund's face changed and Larry looked un-

comfortable, but Mary tried to laugh it off. “Yes, well, when he looks as good as Edmund I guess I can’t help myself.” When no one responded she said, “Food is almost ready.”

Mary started to get up, but Edmund took her hand. “Sit down.”

“But the food—”

“Is fine. I’ll check on it while you entertain your guests.” He left.

Mary clasped her hands together and smiled at them. “Well.”

Sara watched Edmund go. “Kind of forceful, isn’t he?”

“Sara, leave it,” Larry said.

“I was only making an observation. I’d hate to see Mary fall for another Curtis.”

Mary’s tone hardened. “Edmund isn’t anything like Curtis.”

“No, he has more money.”

“I like him,” Larry said.

“You liked Curtis, too. Women who let men sweep them off their feet are in for a fall.”

“Edmund hasn’t swept me off my feet. I haven’t lost my head, and I really like him. If you gave him a chance you’d like him, too.”

“I could never trust a man with eyes like that.”

She shivered. "As cold as a snake's." She sent a poignant glance at Cammie. "Or a lizard's."

"He's not cold at all."

"I think—" She stopped when Edmund returned.

He sat down close to Mary and took her hand in his. "The food will be ready in a few more minutes."

Mary tried to fill those minutes with empty chatter, although no one seemed inclined to talk. Larry stared around the apartment, Sara preferred to sip her drink and Edmund stared at her in a way that made Mary nervous. Sara didn't like him but what was worse was Edmund didn't like her and made little attempt to hide it. "I think dinner's ready," Mary cheerfully announced, then returned to the kitchen, certain the meal was done. She placed her casserole in a decorative dish and came out into the dining room. Edmund sat alone at the elaborately adorned table. She glanced at the empty seats and panicked. "Where are they?"

Edmund took the dish from her and set it down. "That looks delicious."

"Where are they?"

He took a knife and cut a piece. "They decided to leave."

"What did you say to them? Make them come back here."

He placed the slice on his plate. "No."

She stared at him, stunned. "You have no right insulting my friends."

"Sara is not your friend," he said softly.

"Of course she is. She's been there for me when no one else thought I mattered. She was loyal and looked out for me. Remember when I told you I needed a place to stay?"

He nodded.

"Although I would have ended up in my car if not for you, Sara would have given me a place to stay, but Larry's nephew is staying with them."

Edmund sat. "No, he's not."

Mary felt her throat constrict. "What?"

"Larry was just telling me how well his nephew is doing at Cal Tech. Quite a long commute don't you think?"

"But Sara said—"

"Sara lied to you."

"You're wrong. It was probably another nephew. You don't know her like I do. She cares about me." Mary grabbed her coat.

"You're not going after them."

"Yes, I am."

He jumped from his seat. "No, you're not."

"Don't tell me what to do," she said, remember-

ing Sara's words. She wouldn't be controlled by him as she had been by Curtis.

"You don't need them."

"Yes, I do." She pulled on her coat and buttoned it. "Who will I have when you leave?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Not now, but you will and then I'll have no one, and I can't risk that." Mary opened the door. "I won't risk that."

Edmund blocked her. "I'm not going to make any promises. I'm not going to say that I'll always be here, but let me say this. I'd rather die of thirst than drink from a crystal glass filled with water that woman offered me. She doesn't care about you, and now she envies you. Deep down you know that's true."

Mary pushed past him and caught the elevator. Once on the ground level, she dashed out the front doors—the autumn winds chilling her skin and scattering leaves across her path. When she saw their car pulling out of a parking space, she waved them down. Larry stopped and rolled down the window.

Mary rested her hands on the door frame. "I'm so sorry about Edmund," she said in a breathless rush. "Please come back. He doesn't understand. He thinks that you didn't offer me a place to stay

when I needed one, but I told him how your nephew was staying with you.”

Larry looked at her, confused. “No one is staying with us.”

Sara kept her gaze lowered.

Mary furrowed her brow. “But when I called...” She smiled weakly. “There’s been a misunderstanding.” She looked at her friend. “Sara?”

Sara turned a cold gaze to her. “Yes, I lied, okay? I didn’t want you staying with us. You’d changed so much I wasn’t sure I could trust you around Larry.”

“Sara!” Larry said, shocked.

“I’ve seen the way you look at her.”

“But we’re just friends.” He placed his hand on her knee. “You know I love you, honey.”

Mary gripped the car door, the wind chilling her fingers. “You know you can trust me.”

“Trust you?” Sara spat out. “You start getting new clothes and makeup and don’t tell me why or where. How am I supposed to trust you?”

“I thought you’d at least be happy for me.”

“You seem happy enough for yourself. You only invited us over so you could brag about your great apartment and boyfriend. You’ve got it all, Mary. You don’t need me anymore.” She folded her arms and looked away.

Mary stared at her, disbelief making her numb. “A person always needs a friend.” Mary released the door. “But I guess you never truly were one.” She turned and walked back inside. She didn’t turn when Larry called out her name.

Chapter 8

Mary rode the elevator determined not to cry. When she entered the apartment, Edmund sat at the dining table, his food untouched. After hanging up her coat she joined him at the table and prepared her plate. His gaze never left her. When Mary looked up at him she saw his resemblance to a cold-blooded creature as his calculating stare measured her every mood. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, then took a bite of the casserole. “It’s cold.” She took her plate and his and warmed them in the microwave. Minutes later she returned to the

table, handed him his plate and sat down to eat. After a few minutes, she slammed down her fork.

“Say something.”

“You don’t want me to talk about it.”

“You can talk about something else.”

“No, I can’t.”

“I won’t let you control my life. Curtis didn’t like my friends, or my choice in decorations or anything. But that’s who I am. I’m not perfect, and I don’t want to be with anyone who thinks I should be. I make mistakes and I don’t want to be judged, okay?”

“I’m not Curtis.”

“I didn’t say you were.” She glanced at his untouched plate. “Your food will get cold again.”

He lifted his fork and took a bite.

“I’m not sleeping over at your place tonight.”

He cut into his casserole with unnecessary force.

“You’re sleeping here.”

He didn’t look up, but she sensed his smile.

“Good riddance,” Mrs. McQueeth said when Mary told her the events of the previous evening.

Mary handed her a cup of tea, then sat down, incredulous. “You, too?”

“Sara was jealous of you even before all this, but she just couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“Jealous of me before this? Why?”

“Why not? You’re a successful businesswoman.”

Mary sniffed. “I’d hardly call myself successful—I had no man and hadn’t been promoted in years.”

“But you’re a jewel. I hope you’ll realize that one day.”

Mary added sugar to her tea. “Edmund shouldn’t have done what he did that night. And to this day I don’t know what it was. I didn’t hear anything in the kitchen. What did he do or say to them?”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s a good man.”

“He’s a bossy man. Curtis could be bossy, too.”

“He isn’t Curtis.”

“So he’s told me,” she said in a flat voice.

Mrs. McQueeth’s gaze became serious. “You’re happy, Mary. Don’t let anyone take that away from you. Claim your joy.”

“But he’s hiding something. I don’t know what. I can’t trust someone like that.”

“So ask him. Or are you afraid?”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Or perhaps you don’t really want to know.”

Mary nodded. “That could be it. It’s not as though we have anything serious.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s the way we both want it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

Mrs. McQueeth nodded but didn’t look convinced. Mary knew she couldn’t explain her relationship to anyone.

Edmund stayed at her place a few days and then they fell back into the habit of staying at his. He refused to talk about work or that night but was open about everything else. As autumn turned to winter, Mary’s efforts with the community project paid off. Two grant-funding agencies wanted to know more about the project, and Gregory’s reports met her standards.

One evening while Edmund went through his mail, Mary stared at pictures of his grandparents he had on the wall.

“Are your parents dead?”

“No, they just weren’t ready to be parents when I was little.”

“And now?”

“I’m not ready to be their son.” He tossed a decorative white envelope away. Mary saw that it was an invitation.

She rushed over to the wastebasket and retrieved it. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

She ran her hand over the envelope. "It's a wedding invitation."

"Yes?"

"Aren't you curious who it's from?"

He opened another envelope. "It's from my sister," he said in a flat, disinterested tone.

"You're throwing away your sister's invitation?"

"Yes."

Mary opened it, then showed him. "But it's a *wedding invitation*."

He shrugged in a casual motion that didn't look casual at all. "Doesn't matter, I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"She doesn't need me there."

"But she wants you there."

"She's being sentimental. She'll get over it."

"That's horrible."

His eyes flashed with sudden anger. "Look, she has the family that she wants. She's chosen the life she wants to live and I've chosen mine. She wants our parents in her life and I don't."

Mary was too stunned to let his anger frighten her. "You're really going to cut her out of your life?"

Edmund returned to his letters. "I already did."

She snatched the letters from him. "You're going to punish her for her choice because it was different than yours? Isn't she the same little sister you loved?"

"She—"

"She wants her big brother to see her get married. She's not asking you to reconcile with your parents."

He snatched the letters back and continued shuffling through them.

"Is this your idea of revenge?"

He slit one open.

"At least I'll know what to expect when I do something you disapprove of."

"You're different."

"How can I be different?"

"Because she's my sister and—"

"You love *her*," Mary finished. He didn't need to agree, the truth was evident on his face. He loved his sister; he didn't love *her*. That was the difference. It shouldn't have hurt, but it did; she shouldn't have cared, but she did. Mary quickly dismissed the emotions. The old Mary would want commitment; the new Mary didn't need that from anyone. She didn't expect Edmund to stay in her

life, and it was foolish to expect love from him. She didn't need him to love her. She was fine keeping things as they were.

She liked him very much, but it was nothing like the deep attachment she'd felt for Curtis. She'd always been thinking about Curtis, wanting to please him. When she was in a shop she'd wonder what Curtis would like, what he was doing, was he happy. Since knowing Edmund, she'd never asked those questions about him. She didn't go out of her way to please him; he was very easy to please, in more ways than one. Their relationship was simple without the complicated layer of emotions that had been in her past relationships. She was happiest in this one.

She made no demands of Edmund and he offered no promises. That was the way they both wanted it to be until it ran its course, however long that would be. Mary glanced at the invitation again with an odd twinge of regret. One day, hopefully not too far in the future, she'd send out a similar announcement, but Edmund's name wouldn't be there. She didn't want to think about that day. She touched the violet lace trim. "This looks handmade."

"Probably is. Jenna is very artistic."

She set the invitation down. "I'd like to meet her."

"Then go ahead and reply. I'm not going." His gaze briefly met hers with a cold intensity. "That's the end of it."

But it wasn't the end for Mary. She decided to send in the RSVP, certain she could wear Edmund down before the wedding, but he rebuffed any attempt she made. One busy Thursday afternoon while Mary was meeting with a vendor, Edmund stormed into her office. "Meet me in the conference room. Now." He spoke the words softly, but they sent a chill through her. Her stomach twisted in fear. But she wouldn't let fear overwhelm her. "I'll be with you in a minute, Mr. Davis," she replied, determined to be professional.

His ice-cold gaze fell on her colleague. "Then I'll wait."

The vendor jumped from his seat and hastily began gathering his belongings. "There's no need for you to wait. We're just about done here." He dropped several pages on the ground and scrambled to keep his PDA balanced on top of a large stack of folders along with other papers he stuffed under his arm.

Mary shook her head. "Now, don't—"

“Don’t worry, Mary. I can finish from here. You can go on.”

“Good,” Edmund said, then headed down the hall.

“He really looks upset,” the vendor said.

Mary sighed. “I know.”

When Mary entered the conference room, the first thing she noticed was the blinds. They all remained closed except one, which let a thin sliver of winter light cascade over the long, polished table. Edmund stood at the head of the table with his hands placed before him as though he were ready to address a crowd.

Mary quietly closed the door behind her, gripping the handle as she watched him. “Should I sit down?”

“Right now I don’t care what you do.”

Although his tone never rose above a gentle rumble, the anger behind it penetrated the room’s silence. Mary took a deep, steadying breath and approached the table. “Okay. What’s wrong?”

“I just received a call.”

“Oh?” She pulled out a chair.

“From my sister.”

She sat. “Oh?”

“She thanked me for replying to her invitation.”

“Oh?”

“Stop saying that,” he snapped.

Mary clasped her trembling hands together. “I’m sorry.” She’d expected him to be annoyed, not furious. She wished he’d just shout at her instead of cocooning himself in his controlled, quiet anger.

Edmund slowly came around the table, Mary’s wariness growing as he drew closer. “How did she get the mistaken impression that I would be attending her wedding?”

“You must know why, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

He stopped beside her. His eyes bore into hers like nails. “You have no business going behind my back and messing with family affairs.”

She made a helpless motion with her shoulders. “I just thought—”

He rested a palm on the table and another on her chair, trapping her. “I don’t care what you think. I don’t care if you think I’m cold and unfeeling.”

“Actually...” Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat, then started again. “Actually, I think it’s the exact opposite.” He blinked, surprised, and Mary gained courage when she realized that she’d hit a nerve. She stood and boldly stared up at him. “You want to shut her out because you don’t want to admit how much you miss her.”

He flashed an ugly smile. "No, that's not it."

"Can you honestly tell me that you didn't like hearing the sound of her voice again? To know that you made her happy?"

He rested his hands on his hips. "I don't like being manipulated, Mary. By anyone. Especially someone close to me."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head, exasperated. "I don't believe you."

"I just thought you were making a big mistake."

"The mistake is yours." He turned away. "It's over."

For a moment she didn't breathe. When she finally did, her knees gave way and she fell into a chair. Was this how it would end? She'd prepared herself for this day, but it felt too soon. She wasn't ready to give him up. The first time she'd asserted herself with him, she'd gone too far and she didn't know how to fix it.

"Mary!"

Her head snapped up. "Yes?"

"I asked you a question."

"Sorry. I didn't hear you."

"I know," he said drily. "That's why I asked you *two* more times."

“My mind drifted off.” She briefly touched her forehead, trying to gather her thoughts. “I’ll get my things directly after work.”

“What things?”

“And I believe you have some things at my place. It’s not much, though.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Our breakup.”

He sat down, stunned. “You’re breaking up with me? When did you decide this?”

“I didn’t. You did.”

“When?”

“Just now. You said it’s over.”

He sighed. “I was referring to your attempts to manipulate me, which I just explained, but obviously you weren’t listening.”

The tightness in her chest eased. “So you’re not breaking up with me?”

A twinkle of amusement entered his gaze. He gently lifted her chin with his fingers and a smile that was both kind and a little wicked touched his mouth. Her pulse quickened. “I wouldn’t let you off that easily.” He bent down and gave her a playful kiss on the forehead.

The touch of his lips filled her with delight. “Oh?”

He frowned.

“Uh, I mean, I see.”

“No, you don’t.” He ran a tired hand down his face and slumped back in his chair. “She wants us over for dinner.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

Edmund stood and his enigmatic smile returned. “Yes, I know.” He walked to the door.

Mary sent him a cautious look. “What are you up to?”

He opened the door and winked. “Revenge.”

Chapter 9

Mary couldn't imagine what kind of revenge Edmund had in mind. Before leaving the apartment, she tried to get information about his family, but he refused to talk about his parents and when she asked him what Jenna did for a living he laughed so hard she decided not to ask again. He didn't talk to her on the way there. She assumed it was part of her punishment and decided not to ask any more questions.

But questions filled her mind once Edmund turned into a private drive and drove up to a house that looked like a giant replica of a fashion doll's

dream house. Mary didn't know so many shades of pink existed. A light dusting of snow clung to the awnings and looked like powdered sugar on the bare birch trees.

"Your sister lives here?"

"Yes."

"What does she do?"

Edmund laughed again.

"I don't know what you find so funny."

"You'll find out." He parked the car and exited before she could reply. Moments later they stood on the front step waiting for the door to open. When Edmund rang the doorbell a fifth time, Mary rubbed her gloves together, trying to keep warm. "Perhaps they're not home."

"They're home. It just takes awhile for someone to answer the door."

At last the door opened and a small, round man with a bushy mustache opened the door. He smiled, his teeth looking eerily white against his black mustache and brown skin. He pumped Edmund's hand and said in a voice two registers lower than Mary expected, "Nice to see you." He grabbed Mary's hand and gave it the same vigorous shake. She would have fallen forward had Edmund not steadied her once the man abruptly

released her hand. "And it's nice to see you too, my dear." He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to the side. "A *Euchroma gigantea*."

"What?"

"Yes." He nodded, pleased. "You remind me of a *Euchroma gigantea*. A nice chunky one."

Mary stared at him, wondering if she should be outraged or amused. "What is a eu-something?"

"I'm sorry. I'm using the scientific term. It's a metallic wood-boring beetle. Beautiful little creatures from Ecuador. I hope you're not offended, my dear. I'm an amateur entomologist and like to compare people to insects that I've studied. Beetles are my present specialty."

"Oh."

"I can send you pictures."

She flashed a weak smile and glanced at Edmund for help.

Edmund patted the man on the shoulder. "I'll send you her address."

The man clapped his hands together. "Wonderful."

Mary glared at Edmund; he smiled.

The little man held out his hand. "You might as well give me your coats. The others are waiting for you."

Edmund and Mary followed the man into the main foyer, where the preponderance of pink continued, from the carpet to the walls. Once he had their coats carefully thrown over his arm he began to turn, then stopped. His eyes widened as he stared at something behind them. "Did you see that!"

They both turned but saw nothing.

"I didn't think they lived in this state let alone at this time of year. But I'm sure I just saw one fly past. It's extraordinary." He dropped their coats on the floor. "I have to see more." He raced out the door and down the concrete steps.

Edmund calmly picked up their coats and dusted them off.

"Okay," Mary said. "So the butler is a little eccentric. I can handle that."

Edmund opened the closet door, hung up their coats, then closed it. "That wasn't the butler," he said gravely.

The little man returned, looking disappointed. "It was a false alarm," he said, passing by them with his shoulders slumped.

Mary watched him go, then whispered, "Who is he?"

Edmund raised an eyebrow. "You mean you don't see the family resemblance?"

Mary paused, then gasped. "No, he couldn't be."

"Yes, he could."

The little man returned. "I forgot to take your coats."

"I already hung them up," Edmund said.

"Good boy." He turned to Mary. "Did he tell you he's a *Crocothemis chinensis*?"

"A what?"

"A red skimmer," Edmund explained.

"It's a dragonfly," Mr. Davis said. "Reminds me of Edmund. It's swift. You know it can do a lot of things in mid-flight like capture its prey and make love."

"Insects don't make love, Dad."

Mr. Davis made an impatient gesture with his hand. "You know what I mean. Of course dragonflies aren't my favorite insects because they're always darting here and there. I like the steady beetle. Do you want me to tell you why?"

"After dinner," Edmund said, "It's time to see the others."

Mr. Davis spun away. "That's a good idea. Let's go." He led them down the hall.

"That odd little man is your father?" Mary said in a hushed voice as they followed him.

"I'll try not to take offense to the word *little*."

"I can't believe he's even related to you, let alone your father."

"It's a story my grandparents told me. I still have my doubts." Edmund took Mary's arm and led her into the large living room, where an attractive woman in a purple silk track suit sat like a woman holding court.

"Now *she* must be your mother," Mary whispered.

"No, that's the neighbor." He nodded to a woman in a large armchair. "That's my mother."

Mary tried not to stare but couldn't help herself. If Edmund hadn't pointed the woman out to her, Mary would have assumed the chair was empty. The woman blended in so well with the brown cushions and looked as though she'd never said yes to a meal in her life. No doubt her husband affectionately compared her to a walking stick.

"Is your sister somewhere in this room?"

"Yes." He pointed to a side wall. "There."

Jenna certainly was "there," looking down at them from a twelve-foot oil painting of her in a garden dress. Before Mary could reply, a trilly voice cut through the air. "Edmund!"

Mary turned and saw the oil painting come to life in a smaller, but no less exquisite, form. The young woman flew into Edmund's arms, kissing

him on both cheeks, then turned her gaze to Mary. The resemblance to Edmund was evident in her grayish-brown eyes.

Mary had expected to like Jenna, but the moment the woman looked at her she had a sinking feeling she would not. "And you must be Maggie."

"Mary," Edmund corrected. "I told you I was bringing her."

"Yes, I know. I guess I just expected..." She sent Mary an unflattering glance, then shrugged. "You've always had funny taste." She held out her hand to Mary as though she expected a bow or a kiss. Mary briefly shook it instead.

Jenna shooed Mary toward the couch. "Why don't you have a seat?"

Mary sat next to Mr. Davis, who inched closer to her.

Jenna looped her arm through Edmund's before he could take the space next to Mary, and turned to her guests. "Aren't you proud of me for orchestrating this little family reunion? Aren't I clever?"

"Yes, very clever," Mrs. Davis said in a tone that reminded Mary of a dog's mournful howl. "I sometimes wish I were as clever as you." She turned to her husband. "Aren't we lucky to have such a clever daughter?"

Mr. Davis pulled on his mustache. "I still can't figure out if she's a leaf hopper or a lantern bug."

"I think I'm a butterfly," Jenna said.

"Yes, but they don't live very long."

"But they're beautiful." She lifted her chin. "Don't you think I'm beautiful?"

"Yes, very beautiful," Mrs. Davis said. "I sometimes wish I was as beautiful as you." She looked at her husband again. "Aren't we lucky to have such a beautiful daughter?"

Mr. Davis pulled his mustache. "I definitely think she must be a lantern bug."

Jenna pursed her lips. "I don't care what you think, Daddy, I still consider myself a butterfly." She gazed up at Edmund. "Don't you think I'm like a butterfly?"

He tapped her nose. "I've already told you what kind of pest you remind me of."

She frowned. "You're in my house. You have to be nice to me."

"I *am* being nice. I'm not repeating what I told you."

Jenna looked at Mary. "Do you have any brothers?"

"Yes, two."

"Do you look like them? People are always

telling me how alike Edmund and I look. Fortunately, he's so good-looking I don't mind."

Edmund pulled away from Jenna. "Is dinner ready?"

"Yes."

"Then let's eat." He moved toward Mary, but Mr. Davis squeezed between them and took Mary's hand. "I'll show you the way, my lovely beetle. You can sit next to me."

This time Mary knew better than to look at Edmund, and allowed herself to be led.

Dinner was an interesting mix of Caribbean and Southern cuisine. However, the delicious food didn't improve the evening.

Mary tried to start a conversation with the attractive neighbor, who she learned was named Mrs. Lemon, but she answered only in monosyllables and Mary soon gave up. Then she tried to talk to Jenna. After the first ten minutes she found her mildly irritating, after a half hour annoying, and after another half hour she could have cheerfully suffocated her. Jenna talked about nothing but herself, her achievements—she'd made money by creating an accessory for the wildly acclaimed Madison's Hats. They had been so impressed with her invention that they had bought the patent for millions—

and she was absorbed in her travels, her charities, her hobbies and anything else that came to mind.

When a question from her mother and Mrs. Lemon briefly diverted her, Mr. Davis placed a silver grasshopper with beady red eyes next to Mary's plate.

"It's for you. Don't worry, it's dead. It won't hop into your food," he said, chuckling.

Mary plastered on a smile. "Oh, um, thank you."

"Would you like me to pin it on you?" He turned the dead grasshopper over so that all its legs were in the air and she could see the latch attached to its belly. "I make them myself. They hold up very well so you can squeeze them and they won't crumble. It's the coating."

"I'm afraid the color doesn't match my outfit."

"Silver matches everything." He began to stand. "But I could get you one in gold if you want."

Mary politely but firmly grabbed his arm. "No, no, that's okay. I'll just put it in my purse for safekeeping."

"Couldn't you put it on just once? It's not every day that I get to see my pins on a fashionable woman such as yourself."

Mary heard Edmund snicker. She didn't turn to look at him and stifled a groan. "Okay."

She briefly closed her eyes as Mr. Davis's eager fingers slid the pin into place on her blouse. "There," he said with pride. "It looks perfect. Don't you think so Edmund?"

"Yes." Edmund flashed a malicious smile. "Shame you don't have a pair of matching earrings."

Mr. Davis jumped to his feet. "That's a great idea! I'll be right back."

Mary narrowed her eyes. "I will get you for this."

Edmund's smile widened.

Moments later Mr. Davis returned with tiny grasshopper earrings and his digital camera. "I want to take a picture of you in them," he explained.

Reluctantly, Mary put on the earrings and had her picture taken, but not to be outdone, Jenna requested her own pair of beetle earrings and matching brooch and that another photograph be taken. Then the doorbell rang.

Nobody moved.

When the doorbell rang again, Mary looked around the table, confused by the lack of interest. "Someone's at the door."

"Yes," Mrs. Lemon said.

Jenna put more food on her plate. "I'm still eating."

"I got the door last time," Mr. Davis said.

Mrs. Davis sighed and lifted her glass. "I really am *too* tired to get up."

Edmund focused on his food.

The doorbell rang a third time, then a fourth. Before it rang a fifth time Jenna stood and left to answer it.

Mary looked at Edmund and mouthed, "Another neighbor?"

He shrugged. Soon Jenna came in with a man Mary had seen before. "Edmund and Margaret come and meet my fiancé, Elijah Allsworth."

Mary didn't even notice Jenna's mistake with her name. She was too captivated by the man standing next to her. For a second time that night she'd seen a two-dimensional person become real, except he was standing next to the wrong woman.

"What's wrong?" Edmund said.

Mary bit her lip. "What do you mean?"

"You just gasped."

"Edmund!" Jenna said. "Aren't you going to say hello?"

His jaw twitched with irritation, which pleased Mary to know he was having as dreadful a time as she was. He nodded to the man. "Hello."

"And you, too, Margaret," Jenna insisted.

“My name is Mary,” she said, watching the man to see if he recognized her from the office.

He didn’t. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Let’s all go into the living room.” Jenna turned and left, pulling Elijah with her. The rest of the party followed, but Mary remained seated as if stuck to her chair.

Edmund sent her a worried look. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“I know that guy. And he can’t be your sister’s fiancé.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s dating someone in my office.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. That two-timing creep. We have to tell her.”

He laughed.

“I’m not joking.”

“I know. That’s what makes it so funny.”

“Edmund, be serious.”

He shook his head. “You can’t tell her.”

“I have to.”

“She wouldn’t believe you anyway. Besides, you’re not sure. He could just look like the other man you know.”

“I’m sure. It’s him.”

“But you have no proof.”

“Proof can come later. You could hire a private detective—”

Jenna returned to the room and tapped her foot impatiently. “What’s taking you two so long?”

“We’ll be there in a minute,” Edmund said.

“But I—”

Edmund’s voice hardened. “In. A. Minute.”

Jenna opened her mouth to protest, but Edmund pointed to the door in a gesture that halted any attempts at theatrics. Jenna pounded her foot, then marched away.

“As you can see she’s very mature and reasonable,” he said, sarcasm dripping from every word.

“We still have to tell her.”

“She’ll find out eventually.”

Mary stared at him in amazement. “Don’t you care that he’s probably marrying her for her money?”

He took Mary’s hands in his. “Let me be honest. I have received a wedding invitation from my sister every year for the past four years. She chooses inappropriate men because she likes the attention she gets and she wants me to come to her rescue. I did that once, I won’t do it again. It’s all a silly little game I don’t want to play anymore. My parents encourage it because they’re so

happy she's forgiven them. Now do you understand?"

"I still think you should tell her."

He released her hands. "You're not listening to me."

"I'm not saying you need to rescue her, but she needs to know the truth."

Jenna stormed into the dining room. "Edmund, I won't have this. I want everyone in the living room. It's rude to have a private conversation. What are you two talking about?"

"Elijah."

"What about him?"

"He's seeing someone in my office," Mary said.

"So what? He's *marrying* me."

Edmund threw up his hands. "That's it. We're leaving."

Jenna held her hands out, blocking him. "Edmund, you can't leave."

"I can't take this again." He spun away and walked to the other side of the table, creating distance between them. He pounded on the back of a chair. "You do it every time. It started with the convict, then there was the bigamist. Do you remember the cult leader? You had me worried sick."

Jenna gripped the back of a chair and faced him. "At least I knew you were thinking about me. How else am I supposed to get your attention? You're either making money or spending all your time with your latest girlfriend. You don't make any time for me."

He shrugged, unconcerned. "We have nothing in common."

"We could find something," she said with a hint of desperation.

"When you decide to grow up, perhaps we can start then."

"Perhaps when you stop judging everyone I'll grow up!"

Mr. Davis came into the dining room with his hands over his ears. "What's all this shouting about?"

Jenna rushed over to her father. "Edmund's leaving."

Mr. Davis lowered his hands and looked at his son. "Do you want me to get you your coat?"

"Daddy, I want him to stay!"

Mr. Davis covered his ears again. "You can ask them to stay without shouting."

Edmund scowled. "Don't you dare start crying."

Jenna blinked back tears. Mr. Davis patted her shoulder. "It's his nature. He's like a dragonfly. He

can't stay still for long. He's always on the go." Mr. Davis addressed Mary. "You know one day I hope you can tell me what his place looks like. I've never been there," he said, resigned, revealing a thin layer of hurt.

"No one has seen his place," Jenna added, holding back her practiced tears.

"It's probably too fancy for me," Mrs. Davis said as she entered the room with Mrs. Lemon and Elijah following behind.

"That's not the topic," Edmund said.

"What's the topic?" Mr. Davis asked.

"The fact that Jenna keeps doing this."

Jenna vigorously shook her head. "No, it's about Edmund never being around."

"I thought it was about Edmund's place," Mr. Davis said.

Soon everyone was talking and no one was listening. Mary jumped from her seat, raised her hands and shouted, "That's enough."

Everyone stopped and stared at her.

Mary's hands fell to her sides. "I've had it with all of you. First, Mrs. Davis, you're beautiful, so you can stop envying your daughter. You have lovely skin and a great figure. Put some powder on your cheeks and lipstick on your lips, and you'll

be a new woman. Call me if you have any trouble selecting the right shades.”

She turned to Edmund’s father. “Mr. Davis, Edmund will be happy to have you visit, but you have to leave the insects at home. Not everyone is as...um...passionate about them as you are.” She looked at Mrs. Lemon, then decided against it. “And, *you* Jenna. You need a new tactic to get your brother’s attention. How about being the shrewd businesswoman you are? Not just anyone can become as successful as you are. I hope you know you’re worth much more.” She glanced at Elijah. “I have a feeling we’ll see each other again.” She lifted her handbag and turned to Edmund. “Now I’m ready to go. We’ll talk in the car. I have enjoyed this evening on some level that will come to me later.” She smiled at Mr. Davis. “Can you get my coat?”

Eager to please, he hurried out of the room.

“Can I really call you?” Mrs. Davis asked, showing more energy than she’d demonstrated all evening.

“Yes.”

“And you’ll have us over for dinner sometime?” Mr. Davis asked, helping Mary with her coat.

“Certainly.”

Jenna looked at Mary with reluctant admiration. "You're not half bad...Mary."

"Thank you."

Soon they were all talking about how wonderful the evening had been, and it took another twenty minutes before Edmund and Mary were finally able to leave.

Once in the car, Edmund said, "I guess I had it coming."

"What?"

"Your revenge."

"What revenge?"

"Inviting my family over and promising my mother a makeover."

"That's not revenge. I meant it. Family can be aggravating, but you can't get rid of them. Wait until you meet mine."

Edmund sent her a curious look. "So I get to meet them?"

Mary hesitated, realizing what taking that step meant. She'd been able to keep him away from them for months. She had hoped to keep it that way. "Yes," she said, trying to sound casual. "Sure. Eventually." She could already hear how her mother would greet him. *"So you're the new man in Mary's life now. Hope you last longer than the last one. He*

hung around awhile, then left her and took everything." Her brothers would just nod and grunt if asked a question without offering any questions or comments of their own.

"How long will 'eventually' be?"

Possibly never. "Sometime when we're not busy. Maybe in the spring, my workload will be less, then," Mary said, then wanted to kick herself when she saw the joy on Edmund's face.

"Really?"

She nodded and made a noncommittal sound, hating that she was lying to him.

A soft smile touched his face, and Mary's heart sank at her deception. "That would be great. I would really like to meet your family." He rested his hand on her shoulder, then gently brushed his knuckles against her neck, his warm hands belying the cold day. "You've made me really happy. For a while I thought you didn't want me to meet them."

I didn't. "You didn't want me to meet yours."

"My reasons are different. I'm not close to my family. You are. Your mother and brothers send you gifts for your birthdays and the holidays."

He still thought the presents she'd received over the holidays actually meant something. What he

didn't know was she had received the exact same gifts—a knit scarf-and-hat set, mugs and pajamas—six years in a row. Fortunately, the 18-karat-gold bracelet he'd given her had made up for them.

Birthdays and holidays didn't mean much to Mary—her family only used them to remember that she was around—but she knew Edmund wouldn't understand that. He thought her family was nearly perfect. Although he knew her father had abandoned the family, he saw them as the close family unit he never had. She didn't want to explain how wrong he was. Desperate to change the topic she said, “Why didn't you tell me your sister was like that?”

“I told you you wouldn't want to know them.”

“I know, but I thought—”

He raised a mocking eyebrow. “You thought I was an unreasonable bastard who was trying to punish my family because of their past. Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

He patted her on the head as though she were an obedient child. “At least you're honest.”

She playfully swatted his hand away.

He started toying with her earrings. “You look great by the way.”

Mary quickly removed them and the brooch. “I

forgot I was wearing them.” She dropped them in her handbag and shivered in disgust.

“Dad really likes you, my little beetle.”

She playfully stuck her tongue out at him.

“Now you look like a lizard.”

“Oh, that reminds me, I need to buy Cammie some food.”

On the way home they stopped at the pet shop, which was open until late. Mary filled the basket with pet food while Edmund selected new toys he wanted for Cammie’s cage. Neither of them noticed the woman who had ducked behind a display so she wouldn’t be seen, nor did they notice the wicked smile on her face as she watched them leave.

A few days later, Mrs. Davis called Mary for help with a makeover and they went shopping. Mary helped her select the right colors and shade of foundation to match her skin tone and showed her how to do her hair and nails. When Jenna saw what Mary had done with her mother she demanded that they schedule time together, too.

Several weeks later, the two women ended up at a beauty spa, where Jenna announced that her wedding had been cancelled. She had uncovered the truth about Elijah and had dropped him. En-

couraged by the women's friendship, Mr. Davis attempted to reconnect with his son and sent Edmund a framed photograph of a dragonfly and a beetle. Edmund softened and decided to invite him over to his office. It wasn't his home, but it was a start.

As spring approached Jenna discussed having a barbecue, which, to her surprise, Edmund agreed to and told Mary that she should invite her family, as well. She told them that she wasn't sure they'd be able to attend and gave an elaborate excuse as to why. But when they were able to, she would let him know.

One day at work Mary saw Elijah. His eyes widened in panic, but she merely smiled and put a finger to her lips. She found no reason to tell Dianne the truth. Work was going well and her life was full. She visited Mrs. McQueeth weekly, continued to have lunch with Jean, spent time with the Davises and work continued to improve. Twice, James gave her a nearly perfect score on her evaluation and gave her more responsibility. She knew that her promotion was just within grasp. Yes, everything was perfect. Being a member of The Society had definitely changed her life. Then Dianne dropped a bomb.

Chapter 10

Dianne approached Mary's desk, looking way too pleased for such a rainy Monday morning.

"I knew you wanted a promotion," she said in a sly voice. "But I never thought you'd go to such lengths."

"What are you talking about?" Mary said in a distracted tone as she wrote down some notes she needed to make.

"A few weeks ago I was in the pet store buying something for my cat and I saw you there. I would have said hello, but I noticed that you were distracted by the man with you."

Mary's skin went cold. "It's not what you think."

"I may be beautiful, but I'm not stupid. I also know where you live and who owns the building. James has been bragging about how happy Gregory and, especially, Edmund Davis have been, working with you. I wonder how James will feel when I tell him *how* you're making Mr. Davis happy."

"He's not directly related to the project. So I'm not doing anything wrong." Mary turned back to what she was working on, not wanting to forget the important points she'd just been discussing with one of their vendors.

Dianne nodded. "Sure, sure. That's why you've been so open about all this."

"James will understand."

"And *his* boss will completely understand, too?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I had to make sure I wasn't making a mistake. I know you're such a stickler for rules, and it just surprised me that you were seeing the man whose project you're supervising." She lifted the dried rose on Mary's desk. "And also imagine my shock when I learned that you have a close friend living there. I'm sure that makes you very objective."

Mary leaned back in her chair, now used to Dianne's methods. She wanted to tell her that she'd

seen her boyfriend with another woman, but didn't want to do her a favor. She briefly hoped Dianne ended up finding out the truth about him on her honeymoon. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I just want to let you know that I know."

Mary waited.

"However, I could use a little help with maybe two accounts I'm handling, but that's not news to you. You've helped me before." She smiled. "It would be like old times."

Mary flexed her fingers. She was so close to getting promoted. She had only one more month to go. She didn't want to jeopardize her chances. She couldn't let her relationship with Edmund get in the way. She had vowed that she would never be left with nothing again. She had to depend on herself. "Fine."

That evening, Mary ended up taking home Dianne's work. She continued this routine for the next two weeks. She turned Edmund's dining table into a work center. Cammie sat at her feet, occasionally hitting Mary's foot with her tail for attention. Mary briefly stroked her, knowing that she'd been neglecting her beloved pet the past few weeks due to work, but having no other option. She was working on one of Dianne's files when Edmund came home late and sat in front of the TV.

“There’s food in the fridge,” she called from her position at the dining table.

“I already ate.” He patted the seat beside him. “Come and keep me company.”

“I’m busy.”

“You’re always busy nowadays. Just a few minutes.”

“But—”

“I can pick you up, you know.”

“I’d like to see you try,” she mumbled.

He stood; she jumped to her feet and reluctantly sat next to him.

He drew her close and she sank into his warm, solid body, finally feeling her exhaustion. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” he said.

“Yes?”

“How do you feel about kids?”

She stiffened, a rush of feeling flooding her with a longing she didn’t know had been there. “I like them,” she said cautiously.

“Me, too.” He toyed with her hair, then let his fingers brush against the back of her neck, sending tingles through her body.

“Ever want to have some?”

Yes. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

His hand fell to her shoulder. “I was just curious.”

“Oh.” She stared at the TV, but the people on the screen were a blur. “Why are you curious?” When he didn’t reply she turned to him and found him fast asleep. They’d both been tired lately, but she’d never asked him what had been keeping him late at work. It wasn’t that she didn’t care, but she’d been too busy herself to ask.

It wasn’t easy trying to balance the career she needed with the man she wanted. But the problem wasn’t that she wanted him—it was that she *loved* him. Completely, totally, hopelessly, and she hadn’t planned on that. Somehow her brief affair had turned into a relationship.

She felt the old Mary rising up within her—romantic and naive, but she could no longer deny it. She didn’t want to deny it; somehow it felt right, but it also terrified her. She watched him sleep; it was something she liked to do. Sometimes she imagined he opened his eyes and they were a warm brown without any secrets, but she usually let the fantasy fade away.

But she knew her feelings wouldn’t fade. Mary shivered from the anticipation of the pain she knew she’d face. She would have to make a decision soon, and she knew what it would have to be. Edmund had caused her to lose one promotion; she

wouldn't allow him to make her lose another one. No matter what, this year would be her year—no matter how hard she had to work or who she had to lose.

Edmund's eyes fluttered open. "Are you cold?" He moved to get up, although it looked as though it took all his strength to do so. "I could get us a blanket."

"I'm fine," she said, but something in her voice alerted him.

He tenderly stroked the side of her cheek. "What's wrong?"

Mary briefly shut her eyes, remembering the first time she'd met him. He'd spoken just as tenderly then—as if he'd truly cared about her—and she loved him for it. Suddenly, tears stung her eyes.

She blinked them back. "I just have so much work to do."

"There's no need to cry about it," he said, catching a wayward tear with his finger. He gently brushed it away, then kissed her cheek. "Ask Richardson for an assistant."

"It's not that. I really need a promotion. It's important to me."

"You'll get promoted this year. Don't worry."

"On my own terms."

He yawned. "Uh-huh."

"Without interference. If she found out that you had anything to do with it..." Her words trailed off.

Edmund paused. "Who?"

"Nobody," she said quickly. "I'm just rambling."

His gaze sharpened, and he searched her eyes. "You don't ramble. What's going on? Why is your workload suddenly so heavy?"

"I've fallen behind."

"Or someone is giving you more work to do."

She'd forgotten how smart he was or what a poor liar she was. Her gaze fell under his intense scrutiny, forcing her to be honest. "I'm helping Dianne with a few things."

"Why?"

"Because she found out about us and the fact that Mrs. McQueeth is living at the community. If James's boss finds out, I may not get the promotion because it will look bad. It will look like a conflict of interest."

Edmund yawned again, looking bored. "She doesn't know what she's talking about. You're not doing anything wrong, and if she makes any trouble, send her to me." He cupped her chin and smiled to reassure her. "I don't want you worrying about this." Slowly his smile turned a little dan-

gerous, and she saw a flash of the ruthless businessman behind the cold grayish-brown eyes. "You've earned your promotion, and you're going to get it."

"Listen to him," Rania said as they sat in a "Club Only" booth in an exclusive downtown restaurant.

"It's more complicated than that."

"Because you're in love with him."

Mary buttered her bread.

"Have you told him?"

"No, and I never will."

"Why not?"

"Because this relationship has no future."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he's already filled up too much of my life. He's part of my work—my living depends on him. I'm even close to his family now, and I never was with Curtis's family. It's too tangled. I need to break free before I get comfortable."

"What's wrong with being comfortable?"

"My mother was comfortable with my father. He gave her three children and left her to fend for herself. For eight years I was comfortable with Curtis until he decided to leave and take everything in our apartment. It's dangerous to be comfort-

able, and with Edmund it's really easy to be so. He makes me want to depend on him and trust him."

"And you're afraid to."

"I can't." She clenched her hands into fists. "I'm too close to getting what I want. What I've worked so hard for. Soon I'll be able to afford a really nice apartment or condo without a hefty discount and be able to treat Mrs. McQueeth to nice things."

Rania frowned. "Does Mrs. McQueeth need more things? I thought she was happy."

"She's very happy, but I'd like to do more for her. On my own, without Edmund's help. I'm not ungrateful for all that he's done for me. A part of me loves him because he's so generous and he doesn't make me any promises that I know he'll end up breaking." Her voice fell. "He doesn't promise to stay around and he doesn't promise to love me."

"But?"

"But I need to structure my life in a way that when he leaves, I won't fall apart, and right now the way things stand, the moment he leaves my life would crumble again. And I can't face that."

"I don't think you're being fair to him or yourself. What's our motto?"

She repeated the words with reluctance. "As a member of The Black Stockings Society I swear I

will not reveal club secrets, I will accept nothing but the best and I will no longer settle for less.”

Rania pointed at Mary. “We don’t accept less in life or in love. You deserve a man who can offer you those promises and, most important, you should ask for them.”

Mary left the restaurant that evening with Rania’s words resounding in her mind. She couldn’t ask Edmund to make any promises. And yet a part of her wanted to. She wanted to hear words like *forever, marriage and love*. But she also knew they were just words. Curtis had said those words to her many times, and they had been as solid as air.

Rania meant well, but Mary still felt confused. She knew of only one person who could help her untangle her thoughts: Mrs. McQueeth. Mary baked a batch of coconut biscuits and headed over to the community from her friend’s place after work. She knocked on Mrs. McQueeth’s door. It slowly swung open, revealing an empty apartment.

Chapter 11

Mary rushed over to the main building and barged into Gregory's office. He sat at his desk and Edmund stood facing him. He didn't turn around.

"Where is Mrs. McQueeth? I just went to her apartment and it was empty."

"I told you not to remove her things," Edmund said in a harsh tone.

Gregory lowered his gaze. "I had to get everything analyzed immediately."

"You could have waited," he snapped. "They could have done the inspection in the apartment."

"I did what I thought was right." He raised his gaze, sending Edmund a cold look. "I'm still the manager here."

"What are you talking about?" Mary demanded. "Have you moved her to another apartment?" When neither man replied, Mary took a deep breath, then enunciated every word. "What. Is. Going. On?"

"Mary, sit down," Gregory said.

"I don't want to sit down," she said, anxiety making her voice shake. "Tell me what's wrong!"

Gregory stared up at Edmund, as though seeking guidance, then looked at Mary. "It seems Mrs. McQueeth had an accident last night." He hesitated. "Someone looked in on her and found her."

Mary sank into a chair. "Was she badly hurt? Is she in the medical ward? Can I go see her?"

"No." He briefly shut his eyes. "She passed away."

Mary looked at Gregory's bent head, then at Edmund's back, confused. "I don't understand."

"We're looking into everything, but it appears she got tangled in one of the chairs. She may have gotten a piece of clothing caught and..." He didn't finish.

"She was strangled?"

"We don't know. We won't know anything until the report."

But she knew. It had to be that chair. The chair

she had thought was too complicated; the chair Edmund had claimed was safe. Was that what had killed her? Was that why he wouldn't look at her? Because he knew he was partly to blame? She'd trusted him. He had told her he would take care of everything, and now only a year later her beloved Mrs. McQueeth was dead.

She wanted him to face her, to deny or admit something. She couldn't stand his silence. "Edmund?"

He turned and looked at her and the devastation on his face shattered something inside her. She'd expected him to be cool, neutral or distant. Instead, he looked anguished and vulnerable, reflecting all the feelings she didn't want to face. Suddenly, the reality of her friend's death hit her. She thought about the cookie sheet full of her biscuits cooling on the front seat of her car, and the future she had planned with Mrs. McQueeth. But her confidante was gone forever. A numbness gripped her, preventing any tears or visible sign of grief. She didn't want to look at the sadness on Gregory's face or Edmund's. Instead her gaze fell on a file sitting on the desk, it was marked Important—the Board's most recent report.

"I'd like to see that," she said in a dull tone, des-

perate to fill her mind with something else, a part of her denying what she'd heard.

"This isn't a good time," Gregory said.

"More bad news?" she challenged, surprised by how cutting her tone sounded but unable to care.

Gregory shot Edmund another glance, then reluctantly gave it to her. She took the file and left the office as though in a dream.

It took her two days to cry. To allow herself to succumb to the grief that had threatened to burst forth. When it did, she felt drained. It was several days later before she had the strength to look at the report. Mary sat back on her couch and began to read it. She soon wished she hadn't. She learned that there were a host of problems she had never been made aware of in any of the reports submitted. There had been problems with family members visiting and abusing residents. Three residents had been injured as a result of electrical problems with chairs and beds. Two nurses had been dismissed, on the spot, in the medical unit due to falsification of their licensure, and theft was a growing problem.

She'd been reading Gregory's reports for a year and didn't know about any of this. She'd done her own inspection of the medical unit, read the com-

munity reports and hadn't found anything. She now realized that all of the reports submitted to her had been sanitized to make things look better than they really were. Edmund had been hiding these facts from her and she'd never forgive him for that.

"We can explain," Gregory said.

He, Edmund and Mary sat in his office in the same chairs they had sat in during their first meeting, and again Mary had control.

She tossed the report on his desk. "No, you can't."

Edmund came toward her. He hadn't been able to talk to her before. "Mary—"

Mary held up a hand and shook her head, fending him off. She didn't want him near her. "I don't want to talk to you right now. Where is Mrs. McQueeth?"

"At the coroner," Gregory said. "They said that it will take about a week before they will release the body for burial."

Edmund sighed. "I've arranged everything."

She hadn't even thought about the burial arrangement. "Of course. You're good at burying things."

Edmund's eyes flashed dangerously. "Look, I was outvoted on a lot of those issues. A board isn't about one person. It's made up of a lot of individuals."

Mary stood and snapped her portfolio closed.

“True, but a relationship is based on two.” She turned and opened the door. “Goodbye.”

Edmund followed her out. “Just say it.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“There’s a lot to say. Just say it, I can take it. You blame me. You think I killed her.”

Mary spun around and faced him, her numbness turning to anger. “You lied to me. I was so stupid. Everything isn’t as it seems. I was too busy...” She stopped before she said *falling in love with you*. She laughed bitterly. “You were a great diversion. It was a clever plan and it worked.”

His gaze hardened. “You can insult yourself, but don’t insult me.”

She continued down the hall.

He caught up with her. “I’ve gone over and over it in my mind, how it could have happened. It shouldn’t have.”

“But it did. And you—” She bit her lip before she said something she’d regret.

“Go on, say it,” he urged in a low tone. “I know you want to.”

“Why didn’t you tell me what was going on?”

“We were handling things. I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Because there were things to worry about, right?”

“Things have improved. I can provide the documents to prove it if you’ll give me a chance. The things you saw in the report have all been dealt with. I used my own money to investigate the thefts, and we had all the beds and chairs inspected. They were *not* faulty. Some of the residents were having difficulty working them—”

Mary backed away from him. “I’m tired of listening to you. You don’t lie full-out, but you lie by omission. How can I ever trust you? You lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie, I just didn’t tell you.”

“You don’t tell me a lot of things, and I don’t want that anymore.”

“Just trust me this time.”

“This time? Every time I trust you I lose something. First my promotion, then my best friend and now...” She shook her head. “I think I’d be better without you in my life. Please leave me alone.”

Edmund seized her arms; he clung to her, desperate for her to understand. “I can’t leave you alone. Not anymore. These past days have been hell for me. I understand that you’re angry with me, but don’t kick me out of your life. We had—have—something special. Don’t throw it away.”

She struggled to free herself. "Let me go."

"Mary, I just need you to listen to me. Mrs. McQueeth would have wanted—"

"How could you know what she would have wanted? I'm tired of listening to you, and if I had one wish, I'd wish that Mrs. McQueeth were here right now instead of—" She bit her lip, not able to say the word, but it hung in the air between them as though she'd shouted it.

Edmund released her as if she'd spat at him. And for a moment she saw a sight she'd never thought she'd see: she could have sworn that his Arctic gaze had melted into a stream, but he lowered it before she could see any sign of tears. "I understand," he said in a quiet, hollow tone.

His words were simple, but his voice pierced her heart. "Oh, God, Edmund, I didn't mean—"

He lifted his gaze, his eyes hard and flat as though a steel barrier had been constructed. "You don't have to explain." He turned and walked away.

Mary fell against the wall and watched him go until he was out of sight.

Chapter 12

Edmund sat in his office and upturned a snow globe with a small house, a white picket fence and a dog in the yard; he watched the confetti fall. He'd been doing so for the last half hour, reminding himself that he was all right. He had never been dumped by anyone in his life, but he assured himself that he was fine. Mary's words didn't hurt him too much; she was just angry. That was understandable. He understood that she needed space. It didn't bother him that she had taken everything from his place and had promptly removed all of his

things from hers. He didn't mind that when she saw him in the hallway, she barely offered him a glance, or that his bed suddenly seemed too big and that his apartment now felt empty.

He shook the snow globe and watched the confetti twirl. His grandmother had given him his first snow globe when he was eight, but he hadn't started collecting them until his grandfather had become sick. Somehow he was drawn to the happy scenes frozen in the glass bubble. They represented something he couldn't do—freeze the passing of time and hold on to happy memories forever.

He set the globe down. Yes, he was fine. He had made a miscalculation; he would deal with the consequences. His life would go on. He was successful in his business. Mary was just another relationship that hadn't worked out. He was okay with that. The only thing he found annoying was Cammie's large, empty cage. Mary had refused to take it and he didn't feel like throwing it away.

He wasn't ready to make everything final. Yes, he had made an error in judgment, but he'd find a way to alter things to his favor. He had to. It was fine if she didn't want to be with him, but he couldn't let Mary think he had let her down. Even

though he still couldn't understand how the tragedy had happened.

Mrs. McQueeth's death could have been due to natural causes, but it also could have been the result of negligence. That thought ate away at him every day.

He lifted the snow globe again, but this time he didn't see the quiet domestic scene. He saw all that he didn't have. He didn't have a home with a wife, or a pet or kids to come home to, and he wanted those things. He'd wanted them with Mary. She was the one he wanted, and she wished he was dead. A scalding river of fury flooded his veins, and suddenly he hated the image he saw before him. He threw the globe against the wall, where it shattered, staining the wall with water and confetti.

Suddenly he hated them all because they weren't real. They depicted scenes of all the things he wanted but couldn't have. He smashed a globe showing a couple on a beach, a family sledding down a hill, a group of children playing in the snow. He loved the sound of each crash—it freed his mind of the reality that he would never be a husband to the one woman who'd captured his heart. They'd never start a family together, and he'd have to go on living without her. He slumped back in his chair.

His assistant, Dion, burst into the room, looking ready for battle, his knife tattoo standing out from the veins on his neck. "Are you okay?"

Edmund straightened and glared at him. "Mary broke up with me. And do you know why?"

Dion shook his head.

"Because I didn't tell her things that I thought she didn't need to know. I wasn't lying...exactly. It's just how I do business. It's what's made me successful. Is that wrong?"

Dion cleared his throat, still confused by the sight of the shattered glass and confetti. "Perhaps she thinks a relationship should be different than business."

"How? I was protecting her. You protect your greatest assets. I did everything in her best interests." When Dion looked doubtful Edmund decided to clarify. "Of course I also benefited on some level, but that wasn't my only goal." He clasped his hands behind his head. "Do you know that she basically accused me of ruining her life? Despite all that I've done for her."

"Then she doesn't deserve you."

"No."

"I mean you can get any woman you want. You don't need hassles like this."

“You’re right.”

“If she can’t appreciate you then you’re better off without her. She’s done you a favor.”

Edmund nodded. “Yes.”

Dion sat down in a chair and got comfortable. “You’re a businessman. You call the shots, you set the standards and if she can’t follow them then she doesn’t sound worthy of you. I mean from what I’ve heard, she doesn’t seem very smart or capable. We both know she came to you because she had no place to live. We know that her last boyfriend left her, she hasn’t been promoted in years. She’s not exactly the type you usually go for. She was almost like a charity case.”

Edmund’s eyes blazed, but his tone remained cool. “What did you just say?”

Dion rushed to his feet. “Nothing.” He inched over to the shattered glass. “I’ll clean this mess up.”

“Sit down.”

“But—”

“I said sit.”

Dion slunk back into the chair. “I didn’t mean—”

Edmund pointed at him. “Mary is not a charity case for me or anyone. She’s very smart, very capable and...” He sighed, resigned. “I should have given her more credit. I made a mistake and I’m

sorry.” He stood, anger propelling him to his feet and making his voice rise. “She blames me for her friend’s death and I blame myself, but there’s nothing I can do. Nothing.” He pounded the desk. “And I can usually do something. Do you know how many powerful people I know? I have more money than people could ever hope for. I don’t even have to work. But there’s nothing I can do to make this up to her. No matter how many times I say ‘I’m sorry’ I can’t bring Mrs. McQueeth back.” He pressed his fists to his eyes. “If I had to spend every last cent of my money to bring her back, I would.” He let his hands fall to his sides, and turned to the window. “And if I could trade places with her, just to make Mary happy again...” His words fell away as he looked at the street below.

Dion squirmed in his chair, uncomfortable with Edmund’s morbid thoughts. “No, you can’t bring her friend back. But you can admit that you were wrong.”

“That’s not something I do very well. Besides, Mary wouldn’t care. She doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Remember what your grandfather used to say?”

“Before or after he lost his mind?” Edmund scoffed.

Dion continued as though Edmund hadn't replied; he had known Edmund a long time. He knew him when he was just a young man visiting his grandfather in the nursing home where Dion used to work. He'd seen him struggle and become the success he was and didn't want him to forget that. "He used to say, 'If you give up on life, life gives up on you.'" Dion leaned forward. "I've never known you to give up on anything you truly wanted. That's just not the Davis way."

Edmund spun around and stared at Dion, who gripped the arms of his chair, unsure of what the outcome of his honesty would be. He silently sighed with relief when Edmund nodded and said, "You're right." He glanced around the room and gestured to the mess. "Now clean this up."

Dion stood and did a mock salute. "I will."

Edmund smiled. "And give yourself a raise."

Dion opened the door, then bowed. "With pleasure."

Mary placed several large pieces of turnip leaves in front of Cammie, but she just looked at them. Cammie hadn't eaten in days, and she was clearly losing weight. "Come on, don't do this to me." She looked at the newspaper article that high-

lighted Mrs. McQueeth's death and the allegations against The New Day Senior Living Community. Each new article seemed to be more sensational, but nothing had surprised her more than James's response a week earlier.

"Mary, you were at the top of my list for a promotion, but I can't ignore this." He waved the newspapers stacked on his desk. "What do you expect me to do? Ignore the fact that not only did you not notice these problems, you had a friend living there and you were sleeping with a major investor. That's not like you at all. What happened?"

"First of all, having a friend living there allowed me access to all the facilities and I used her as an insider to see how residents were being treated. I accept responsibility for not realizing the level of trouble, but I had been deceived. And regarding Mr. Davis, you don't need to worry about that. It's over now."

"It shouldn't have happened in the first place."

"Who told you about it?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm disappointed with you." He stood and turned away from her. "You're suspended, and we're not going to fund this project any further."

Mary shook her head, thinking about all the happy residents there. She remembered the joy on

Mrs. McQueeth's face when she used to visit compared to the isolation she had dealt with in her previous house. It had been a palace to her and a place where she had made friends. True, there had been problems, but they had been addressed and the media had blown everything out of proportion. Most pilot programs faced obstacles and had to smooth out rough edges, and the community deserved the same chance. It was already under enough scrutiny with the death of Mrs. McQueeth and the unresolved death of a second resident. "That's not fair."

"Fair! Did you see the minutes from the Board?"

"Yes."

James continued anyway. "They had an unlicensed respiratory therapist."

"Who was fired on the spot, once it was learned that her license had expired," Mary countered.

"Residents with unexplained bruises and others given incorrect dosages of medication, which were a direct result of incompetent staff."

"The Board had immediately voted that a different model be used for recruiting staff, which now involves a three-week, intensive orientation program," she said.

"You know we're not the only ones in this mess.

The medical unit is under investigation by state regulators from the Office of Health Care Quality—and until the results from the government’s investigation is completed, a decision has been made to no longer allow the project to receive government payments through Medicaid.”

“But the loss of Medicaid funding is one of the most severe penalties that can be levied against a facility such as theirs. Over seventy percent of payments come from Medicaid,” Mary cried.

“It’s out of my hands. And there’s nothing you can do.”

Mary thought of all of Mrs. McQueeth’s friends being forced to move into sterile nursing homes, and the idea made her angry. The project didn’t deserve to lose funding. “This is premature. You don’t even know the results of the autopsy report.”

James spun around. “That could take months.”

“We can wait.”

“But we won’t.” He tapped the headlines. “This incident makes us look bad, and we don’t like looking bad.”

“I can make us look good again, if you give me a chance.”

“No you can’t. You’re suspended.”

“But it’s not my fault. I’m being used as a scapegoat.”

James rubbed his forefinger and thumb together. “That’s just how things are done here.”

Mary watched his unconscious movement, then knew. “I’m never going to get that promotion, am I?” she said quietly.

“Now don’t try to make me feel guilty, I’m just doing my job.”

“For years you tell me what a good worker I am, how valuable I am to this institution, and every year I’m passed over for a promotion and you say there’s nothing you can do. But there *is* something you can do. You can stand up for me. Instead of telling *me* what a good worker I am, tell your boss. But you’ll never do that because it’s all been a lie. Your job is more important than mine. At last I’m finally seeing it.”

“You’re taking this too personally. It’s a company decision. If you work hard there’s always next year.”

“No, there won’t be a next year for me.” Mary left James’s office and marched to her desk. James followed. She began packing her things.

“Now you’re just being irrational,” James said.

“It was irrational of me to wait around here for so long.”

“What’s going on?” Dianne asked.

Mary continued throwing her belongings in a box. She was glad to escape the pretense. She was tired of it. James could pretend he liked his job, Dianne could pretend she had a great boyfriend and a kind heart, but Mary was tired of pretending that they mattered. “I’ve quit.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Mary met her gaze. “You’re going to be,” she said quietly. “One day soon.”

Dianne’s expression froze.

Mary pushed past them and left.

Jean followed her to the elevators, looking devastated. “You’re really leaving?”

“Yes, there’s no need for me to stay around and get passed over a sixth time. I don’t have a future here.”

Jean’s eyes welled with tears, but she nodded with understanding. “Good luck.”

A week later, Mary didn’t feel very lucky as she sat looking at Cammie. Mary wondered if quitting had been such a good idea. She had enough savings for a few months rent, but not for an indefinite period. She would have to do the job hunt again and her iguana was still depressed and losing weight. Mary glanced up and saw a pair of stock-

ings that she had flung over her chair. She knew what to do.

Mary gathered up all her clothes and accessories, packing them into three large suitcases, and drove to the boutique. "I want a refund," Mary said once Rania appeared. "And I want out of this Society. It hasn't offered me anything. I don't have the man of my dreams, or a promotion, or the people I love. I wish I'd never joined. The old Mary may not have been perfect, but she was doing pretty well until she started wishing for something bigger and wishing for things that didn't come true."

"You're just upset."

"Upset? I discovered that the community I was in charge of has a terrible record. My iguana is depressed because she misses her lovely cage at Edmund's, and in two days I'm burying a woman who was like a mother to me. She might still be alive if I hadn't put her in that place."

"You don't know that for certain."

"But I do know this—I want a refund."

"It doesn't work that way. You're a member for life."

Mary folded her arms in defiance. "But I won't be a member anymore if I tell someone, right?"

Rania narrowed her gaze. "You wouldn't want to do that. If you think things are bad now, they'll get much worse."

"Worse?" she sniffed. "I'm already worse off now than when I started."

"Mary, give it a chance." Rania paused. "You haven't worn the last pair of stockings have you?"

"No."

"Wear them to your next major event."

"I don't even have a job. How will I have an event to go to?"

"You will and I want you to wear the last pair of stockings then. For now, wear the fishnets to the funeral."

"Won't that be...indecent?"

Rania smiled. "Not at all. Mrs. McQueeth would have wanted that."

"How do you know that?"

"Just trust me."

So many well-wishers attended Mrs. McQueeth's funeral that they had to hold the gathering in the main hall. Mary's mother, Kate Reyland, looked around in awe, her feathered black hat swatting Mary's face each time she turned. She looked at Mary, her pretty face pinched up in a

scowl. "I don't know *how* a woman with no family could command such a crowd."

Mary brushed off a feather that had fallen on her nose. "She was a wonderful woman and everyone here knew it."

"Even him?" Kate asked, gesturing to Edmund, who was too good-looking for a man in mourning. "I've noticed you watching him the whole day."

Mary adjusted her jacket.

"Handsome man."

"Yes."

"And you've gone and fallen for him," she scoffed. "You'll never learn, will you? You're always reaching beyond your grasp."

Mary groaned. "Not today, Mom."

"Some women are lucky in love and some women aren't. It's a fact of life."

"Mrs. McQueeth—"

"Was always putting silly ideas into your head. If your father hadn't left me and taken his hefty salary with him, I probably would have fired her."

Mary glanced at the ceiling, wishing she could call on Mrs. McQueeth's ghost to slap her mother.

"Don't think I haven't noticed your change. After your brothers saw you, they went on and on about it."

Mary smiled, pleased that they'd noticed, although they hadn't told her. "That's nice."

"No, it's not. What do men know? You put on some lipstick and they think you've had a face-lift."

Mary sighed.

"I know you, Mary Antoinette Reyland. You may look glamorous, but you're the same old Mary underneath and you can't deny that." Kate glanced down at Mary's gray skirt and fishnet stockings. "And those."

"What about them?"

"Personally, I think those stockings are absolutely inappropriate for a solemn occasion like this."

"I didn't wear them for you. I wore them for Mrs. McQueeth and I don't want another word out of you. Because in a few minutes you may be joining Mrs. McQueeth. Now I need to mingle."

Kate suddenly looked panicked. "Don't leave me; I don't know any of these people."

"No one is going to bite you. Just say hello."

"But—"

Mary squeezed her mother's hand. "You'll be fine." She adjusted her mother's hat. "You might make a new friend."

Mary left her mother and saw Sara and Larry entering the hall. Her heart twisted with the remembered pain of their lost friendship. She froze when they turned in her direction, then offered a shy smile. Larry waved and Sara nodded, then approached her.

"I really am sorry about Mrs. McQueeth," Sara said.

"Thank you." Mary toyed with her necklace, the memory of their visits together to Mrs. McQueeth's house coming back full force, bringing with it tears. She glanced up at the ceiling, hoping to hold them back. "Nice of you to come."

"I wouldn't miss a last chance to say goodbye."

Mary shifted awkwardly, a question burning in her mind. "What did Edmund say to you to make you leave that night you came to dinner?"

"He didn't say anything."

Mary looked at her, surprised. "What?"

"No. He just pulled out a little black box and showed us the ring."

"What ring?"

Sara smirked. "I didn't think he'd give it to you, but I was still jealous." She glanced at Edmund, then shrugged. "I guess I was jealous for nothing,"

she said, sending a poignant glance at Mary's bare finger. "Sad, isn't it?" She moved toward Mary, then thought better of it and walked away.

Mary didn't watch Sara leave. Instead she stared at Edmund, who was consoling a group of residents, one of whom was sobbing uncontrollably on his shoulder.

He'd had an engagement ring? Had he planned to propose to her that night? In the eight years she had been with Curtis, he had never bought her jewelry—let alone a piece that held such promise. Perhaps they'd been mistaken. No, she was the one who'd been mistaken. She was the one who hadn't wanted to talk about the future. And now she realized that what had been in that box would remain a mystery.

They had no future together now. She'd made it clear that she didn't want him in her life, and she couldn't take back the cruel words she'd said.

Instead of mingling, Mary decided to go visit Mrs. McQueeth's old apartment. She had an extra set of keys and let herself in. Once inside, she closed her eyes and sniffed the air, imagining she could still detect the sweet scent of zucchini bread and chamomile tea. In a corner she saw Mrs. McQueeth's treasured grandfather clock, and on the

floor, her Oriental rug, looking as new as when she first bought it.

Mary wandered into the bedroom, surprised that nothing had been touched. Everything was as she had remembered it, and for a moment she denied her friend's death, desperately hoping that if she waited long enough Mrs. McQueeth would walk through the door.

Mary sat on the edge of the bed, picked up a pillow and smelled it. She ran her hand across the exquisite quilt that covered the bed. It had been a gift Mrs. McQueeth's husband's family had given them as newlyweds, and since his death ten years after the wedding she had placed it on her bed to remember her happy years with him. Mary went through the closets, touching Mrs. McQueeth's coarse wool sweater and polyester skirts and blouses. Next she opened one of the drawers, curious to find Mrs. McQueeth's infamous, mysterious black book. She didn't find it but did find a diary.

Mary sat back on the bed and opened it to a page dated in the spring of the previous year and started to read.

I am so happy. I can't believe that Mary has

done this for me. She is such a good woman. She's as sweet as she was as a child. Although I do worry about her, I have hopes that she will eventually allow herself the blessings she deserves.

As Mary continued to read, she was surprised how often her name appeared, but more how joyful Mrs. McQueeth's year had been. Her friends, her activities—she had lived every moment to the fullest and even discussed the man she called “My Heart.” Mary smiled as she continued to read, then gasped when a certain name jumped out at her. *Edmund came over today as he always does.* Edmund had visited her? When? Mary continued to read in disbelief.

He took me to the museum as he promised. He knows that I get lonely when the anniversary of Luella's death comes by. He even brought a cake to celebrate her birthday.

And another entry.

We visited the cemetery today. Edmund showed me where his grandparents are buried. I know it hurts him to talk about them, but he trusts an old woman and I use that to draw him

out. He doesn't trust easily and that's his failing, but with time he will learn.

And another.

We bought the ring for Mary. It's beautiful. Edmund thought it was too plain, but I said it was perfect. I know my Mary. I can't wait until he asks her.

And more.

Edmund and I had a little argument today. He still hasn't asked Mary to marry him. He says that Mary's not ready. I think he's afraid she'll say no. He doesn't take rejection well. I told him that I won't live forever and I want to be at their wedding. I hope he asks her soon.

Mary slammed the diary shut, unable to read any more. Pain mingled with disbelief. Twice Edmund had told others he'd wanted to marry her? Why hadn't he told her? She pushed the diary back in the drawer and closed it. Part of her knew the answer. She'd never given him a chance. She was the one who'd wanted to keep their relationship as an affair, and that's what she'd gotten. It was too

much to take in. She glanced down and noticed a black feather on the floor. Damn her mother's silly hats. She spent a fortune on buying them... Mary stopped. *A fortune*. Slowly, an idea came to her. She knew how to raise money for the community. She said goodbye to some of Mrs. McQueeth's friends, then left the hall. At home, she immediately called Jenna. "I need your help."

Chapter 13

They met for lunch along with Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Lemon. And Mary told them of her idea. With the government funding temporarily on hold, the community needed some form of fund-raiser, or Edmund and the other investors and, most important, the residents would lose everything. Mary wanted to hold an auction and use Jenna's contacts to help her.

Jenna immediately contacted the home office for Madison's Hats, and used her business savvy to negotiate an unbelievably low price for the large number of items she purchased from them.

They agreed to provide a total of one hundred hats, each costing an average of five hundred dollars, plus one hundred designer bags and shoes to match. Following several planning meetings they agreed to use the residents as models, and Mrs. Lemon amazed them all by getting the grand ballroom of the famous downtown Yardley Hotel for the event and having them cover all costs. Mary engaged the help of Rania and Cynthia from the hair salon to do the makeup and style their models' hair for the event. The residents were beside themselves. Rania offered to loan clothing for the event and the excitement of the upcoming event renewed the community.

Edmund felt it, too, although he was careful not to be too close to it. Mary wanted him out of her life and for now it would stay that way. He'd seen her at the funeral, but she'd disappeared before he had a chance to say anything. Unfortunately, he had to hear about how wonderful and brilliant Mary was from Jenna and his mother. Although it hurt, he liked to know that she was happy. That night he fell on his couch, exhausted from another tedious meeting of investors, taking back their money. He had already sold a property to cover some of the lost revenue. After watching a sitcom on TV he promptly fell asleep.

He didn't dream at first, then he imagined Mary's voice calling for him.

"Edmund, please help me!"

He couldn't believe how real it sounded. "I always will," he mumbled.

"Please, Edmund, I need you!"

Edmund slowly woke up. The pounding continued. His eyes flew open. He dashed to the door and swung it open. His heart leaped at the sight of her, then constricted with worry by the look on her face.

He gripped the door frame to keep from touching her. "What's wrong?"

She held up what lay cradled in her arms. "It's Cammie. She's been panting and she's hot to the touch. When I called my vet he said she's likely overheated and to just put her into a cooler area, but she hasn't cooled down yet and I don't know what to do."

Edmund took Cammie from her. "I do." He went into the kitchen and grabbed a spritz bottle. "Fill that with lukewarm water." After she did Edmund lightly misted the iguana. Slowly the panting stopped. "She's probably dehydrated so this won't be enough. Go and prepare a bath. Not cold. Make sure the water is lukewarm."

Mary raced into the bathroom, glad that Cam-

mie had improved but no less concerned. She struggled to turn the knobs but eventually managed to fill the tub. "It's ready!"

Edmund entered the room with his sleeves rolled up and Cammie cradled in his arms. He gently placed her in the water. Mary watched his hands, remembering how they'd held her just as tenderly. She turned away.

"It's going to be okay," he said.

"Thank you." Why couldn't it be okay for them? Why did he have to be the man who'd caused her to lose her promotion twice? The man who'd kept secrets from her?

After about fifteen minutes Edmund took Cammie out of the bath and towed her. The iguana looked healthier. "There we are. Much better. I think she deserves a treat. I have some melon in the fridge. It will help rehydrate her."

In the kitchen Mary fed Cammie a piece of cantaloupe. To her relief, Cammie ate it.

She glanced at Edmund, who stood at the sink washing the knife he had used to cut the melon. "I guess all those books you read about iguanas came in handy. Thank you."

He dried the knife, then put it away. "You're welcome."

Mary hesitated. "Would you mind keeping Cammie for a while? She's really not doing well and I'm afraid she'll...she misses her cage and I know this wouldn't have happened if she'd been here."

"I don't mind looking after her," Edmund said. "I'll make sure nothing happens to her."

Mary didn't respond, the memory of Mrs. McQueeth still separating them.

"You can trust me."

She touched Cammie's skin. "Just make her better."

"I will."

Mary went to the door.

"If there's anything else, I'd be happy to help."

Mary started to say no, then stopped and sent him a pensive look. "Actually, I'm glad you asked. I could use your help."

"Stop moving," Jenna scolded him.

"When Mary asked for my help this isn't what I had in mind," Edmund said.

"You're going to be the perfect master of ceremonies." She adjusted his jacket. "Too bad we couldn't put *you* on auction."

"You'd have to kill me first."

She smiled smugly. "I'd bet you would be out there if Mary was willing to bid."

"She wouldn't bid on me."

"What happened between you two?"

"Are you finished yet?"

Jenna drew back and looked at him. "Yes." She watched him turn. "You're not going to tell me?"

"No."

On the night of the auction, a crisp summer wind greeted the participants. With word that some of the expensive hats were going to begin bidding for as low as fifty dollars, the ballroom was filled to capacity. Edmund stood at the podium and looked at his mother and Jenna. They outstayed everyone with matching bright pink silk off-the-shoulder full-length gowns, glass slippers and large dangling earrings made of semiprecious stones. His father wore a dark suit with a ladybug pin on his lapel. But the residents looked the best. The women looked fashionable in their gowns and the men wore their finest suits to act as escorts for the models. Then he saw Mary and couldn't tear his gaze away, his mind aching for the words that would make everything all right again.

Mary was too busy to notice him. She had started the evening in a panic, beginning with the

last pair of stockings she was to wear. She slipped into the pair of lace-top diamond-net stockings attached to a garter belt, then immediately knew she had come full circle. The old Mary and the new Mary had become one. She took a deep breath and put on a knee-length, turquoise chemise dress, glass bead necklace and earrings—Jenna had insisted—and a pair of black satin shoes. *Tonight will be a success*, she told herself. But once she entered the ballroom she wasn't as sure. Mr. Johnson hadn't practiced what he was to say and had lost his reading glasses, and Mrs. Pointer, an elderly woman of ninety-nine years of age, refused to wear the hat. Instead she wanted to just carry it on her lap and hold it up while she was pushed in her wheelchair.

"Everything's going to be fine," Jenna said, seeing Mary's worried expression. "Don't worry about Mr. Johnson or Mrs. Pointer. Nobody expects this event to be perfect."

"I hope it works."

"It will. Tonight's our lucky night." Jenna glanced at something in the distance, and Mary turned to see what it was. She saw Edmund and her heart stopped, a feeling of loss cascading over her as she looked at him. She spun away. "The show's about to start."

Lady Luck definitely made an appearance that night. At the end of the evening Edmund announced the six-figure amount they had raised and the crowd cheered. Gregory hugged Mary. "You saved us."

"I had a lot of help."

"Edmund was right. You were the perfect person for this project." He hesitated, catching a glance at his friend in the background. "If you can forgive me, you can forgive him, too."

"I already have, but that doesn't mean I can be with him."

Gregory shoved his hands in his pockets. "Just because you've gone down a certain road doesn't mean you have to stay there. You can make U-turns. Why let pride keep you on a lonely road?"

"I'm proud of you," Edmund said as he helped Jenna with her coat. He turned to his parents and Mrs. Lemon. "All of you."

His mother hugged him and his father patted him on the shoulder. "Perhaps you're not so much a dragonfly as a flying beetle."

Jenna hugged him. "It was a great night."

"I can't tell you how thankful I am for all that you've done."

"We only helped," Mrs. Lemon said. "You

should be thanking Mary.” When the group turned and stared at her, she impatiently threw her shawl over her shoulder. “It’s the truth.”

Jenna nodded. “It is. This is all due to her.”

Edmund sighed. “I know. You’ve been hinting at it for weeks.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Something.”

“I could talk to her for you.”

“I can handle this.”

“Are you sure?”

He affectionately tweaked her chin. “Yes, little sister, I’m sure. But if I need any advice I know who to call.” He looked at them and smiled. “I know I have a family.”

Edmund left and headed down the hall. He saw Mary standing by the elevators. He stopped and began to turn away, then remembered that a Davis never turned away from something he wanted. Although she stood only a few feet away it felt like oceans. He took a deep breath and moved forward.

Chapter 14

“Great evening.”

Mary turned to Edmund, startled. He stood a respectable distance away, but still felt too close.

“Yes.”

“Cammie’s doing well.”

“I’m glad.”

He pushed the down button.

“Thanks for taking care of her for me.”

“It’s no problem. I—” He stopped.

“Yes?”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

“What were you going to say?”

“We heard back from the coroner. Mrs. McQueeth died of natural causes.”

“I know, Jenna told me. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Right.” He hit the down button again. “I’m not a very social person. There are few people I can really talk to.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t...” He moved his hands in a helpless gesture. “Just tell me what I have to do to win you back and I’ll do it.”

“Win me back?”

“Yes. If you want me to create a wing dedicated in her honor I’ll do it. If you want *anything* just tell me and you can consider it done.”

“I just want you to stop hiding the truth from me.”

“I wasn’t trying to hide anything. Gregory and I didn’t want to worry you unnecessarily. I’m not hiding anything anymore.”

She looked doubtful. “Really?”

“Yes.”

She studied her manicure. “I read Mrs. McQueeth’s diary. You’re mentioned in it a lot.” She raised her gaze to his face. “I found out that you had taken her out for dinner and bought her things.” She threw up her hands, exasperated. “Why didn’t you tell me you were visiting her? What was the big secret? Why couldn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t feel it was a big deal. Every time I went to meet with Gregory I would stop by to see her and make sure things were okay. I said I would look after her for you.”

Mary shook her head in disgust. “You’re lying again.”

“I’m not lying.” When Mary moved to walk past him, Edmund grabbed her wrist. “Look, I’m sorry. I should have told you, but I am used to keeping things to myself.”

Mary yanked her wrist away and shouted, “Why?”

“Because it’s safer! People can’t hurt you when you know more than they do. It gives you the upper hand. Growing up I didn’t have the upper hand. Everyone knew my parents were different and that my grandparents had to raise my sister and me. It was a small community and they knew all my weak spots and used them against me. Then we moved to a brand new neighborhood and I learned that life was like a card game. You have an advantage the more your opponent *doesn’t* know about you. When people know too much they can hurt you.” He rested his hands on his hips and lowered his head. “But I never considered that having the advantage could also hurt someone else. Someone I truly care about.”

“How can I trust you?”

Edmund took an awkward step toward her. “I don’t often ask for forgiveness, but I’m asking you to forgive me.”

“I do,” she whispered.

“I can’t bring her back, but at least—”

Mary shook her head. “No, I’m not talking about Mrs. McQueeth or the community center or my promotion. I’m talking about you. How do I know I can trust you? My father left me, and before Curtis I never had good relationships with men. I wish I *knew* you were different, but I don’t.”

The elevator arrived. They stepped in.

Edmund leaned against the wall and sighed, feeling the hopelessness of the situation. He stared at the lit numbers as they descended. “Thanks for what you did for the community,” he said in a distant voice. “The residents looked great. I know you didn’t do it for me, but—”

“Yes, I did,” she whispered.

He turned to her with renewed hope. “What?”

She kept her gaze on the elevator doors. “The auction, the fund-raiser, the publicity. I did it all for you.” She looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. “Because I can’t help loving you.” When he moved toward her she stopped him. “That doesn’t

mean we can be together. I can't trust that you'll stay around, but we can be friends."

Edmund pounded the emergency button and the elevator halted to a stop. His voice rose above the flashing red lights and alarm. He grabbed her. "I love you," he said, his words raw with emotion. "I don't know when it happened and sometimes I don't know why, but I do and I can't stop myself. I'm happy about your successes, but I don't want to be neighbors or colleagues or lovers—I want you to be mine. I want to know you'll be with me in the morning when I wake up and when I go to bed at night. I want you to carry my name, I want you to carry my child and I want you to share my life. I don't want anything less than that. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

A voice came through the call box. "Are you all right in there?"

"Yes," Edmund said, his gaze never leaving Mary's face. "I made a mistake and I'm sorry."

"Okay. We'll cancel the crew."

The alarm stopped, the elevator started moving again and suddenly all they could hear was their breathing. "Mary, I wanted to tell you this many times, but I knew it wasn't what you wanted to hear. I promise—"

She pressed her fingers against his lips. “No, don’t promise anything. Promises get broken.”

He removed her hand and held it close to his chest, where she could feel his heart beat. The heat of his grayish-brown eyes penetrating hers. “I promise that I will never leave your side. That I will not keep any secrets from you, unless it’s a surprise, and until my last breath you will hold my heart. I want you to be my wife.”

Mary gazed up at him. His eyes still reminded her of the Arctic, and she knew the color would never soften or be warm. He would never be very social and she would likely always have to remind him to listen, but she didn’t want another man because no other man had ever looked at her like this. And she knew she could stare forever into the gaze of those cool grayish-brown eyes, which reflected a love that always forgave, never judged and promised forever.

To trust was a risk, but it was a risk she was willing to take. “You want me to be your wife?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you care what *I* want?”

“Only if you want me, too.”

The elevator stopped on the ground floor and the doors opened. Mary took his hand and stepped

out. "I do." She turned and kissed him, no longer afraid to feel the true longings of her heart. "More than you know."

"I knew I wanted you the first time I saw you, I just didn't realize how much."

She smiled. "Do you always get what you want?"

"Would it sound arrogant if I said yes?"

Mary nodded. "Definitely, but at least it would be honest."

"Do you always get what you want?"

"I didn't used to until—" She thought about the day she had received a mysterious invitation in the mail.

"Until what?"

"Until I found the courage to claim it." They walked out into the summer evening.

Edmund stopped and they both looked up at the blanket of stars. Then Mary whispered, "I did it Mrs. McQueeth—thank you."

His gaze fell to her face, love reflecting in his eyes. Mary threw her arms around him and, for a moment, as she looked over his shoulder, she could have sworn the stars twinkled and formed a pair of stockings.



ISBN: 978-1-4268-1927-8

POWER PLAY

Copyright © 2008 by Sade Odubiyi

All rights reserved. The reproduction, transmission or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without written permission. For permission please contact Kimani Press, Editorial Office, 233 Broadway, New York, NY 10279 U.S.A.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

® and TM are trademarks. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and/or other countries.

www.kimanipress.com