



TRUDY
DOYLE

THE
LADY'S
CHOICE

ra^venous
romance

The Lady's Choice

A Ravenous Romance™ Modern Love™ Original Publication

Trudy Doyle

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication
www.ravenousromance.com

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Chapter One

RIVERBORO, NJ

MID-DECEMBER

Leslie Parks knew she had finally lost it when she caught her reflection in the elevator door.

“Damn...” she murmured, twisting her loafer-shod left foot. On her right was a Nike.

She grabbed a rubber band from her purse, pulling her blond hair into a ponytail just as the doors opened. On the other side sat a woman in a wheelchair clutching a baby, an exhausted-looking man behind her.

“Maternity’s on this floor, right?” Leslie asked.

The man simply lifted a brow.

“Yeah, dumb question,” she said, shifting around them. Seems she was sputtering a ton of idiocy lately, but who could blame her? So many hits had left her punch drunk.

“I’m looking for Pam Carmelli,” she said to the security guard behind the desk.

The woman barely glanced up. “Name?”

“Leslie Parks. She’s expecting me.”

She brought up a file on her screen, scanning. “So she is.” The guard slid a badge to the counter. “Wear it while you’re here. Room 482, last door on the left.”

“Thanks.” She snatched it, trotting toward the crowded hall.

It was early, just past nine, but already the floor was packed. And loud, at least for

a hospital. But it was a happy kind of raucous, which only made Leslie's throat constrict. Because if ever she had envisioned herself an occupant here, any bent in that direction had long since been extinguished. Especially with the second half of the equation, her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Ted Parks, now on the other side of town, cooling in the County Jail.

Bastard. Hope you're finding out firsthand what it's like to be someone's bitch.

She stopped at 482 and knocked.

"Come on in!"

Leslie held her breath, pushing open the door.

The scents accosted her first: of flowers, of baby, of something vaguely indefinable. She looked to the dazed yet bright-eyed woman across from her, propped up with pillows, a dark-haired infant in each arm. Her mouth crooked.

"Hey, Les," Pam said sleepily. "Look what the stork dropped on me."

"That's nothing," said one big, beaming man in the chair beside her, holding up a copper-haired bundle. "Look what he left *me*."

"Oh Roark..." Leslie breathed, stepping in.

"This is Mary," he said, fairly gushing, kissing the top of her head. "Beautiful, isn't she? Little Mary Margaret."

"And this is Patrick and Michael," said Pam. She glanced to her husband. "Roark's already worn them out. Now he's working on the girl. I think they're all going to have his lip marks permanently embedded into their skulls."

"That's Patrick *Sean* and Michael *Roark*. And you be quiet, woman," he said, kissing the infant again. "If it wasn't for a job well done, I'd take you outside and give

you a thrashing.”

“Here’s a good stick to beat the lovely lady,” Leslie said, quoting *The Quiet Man*. “Hey, you two wouldn’t happen to be Irish, would you?” She leaned in to kiss Pam’s cheek. “How’re you doing, sweetie? Was it a long labor?”

She laughed softly. “If Roark didn’t run every red light, I would’ve channeled my ancestors and given birth in a potato field.”

“It’s the truth,” he said, slipping the baby into Leslie’s arms. “They popped out like three little cannonballs. First Michael, then Patrick, then Mary.”

Leslie cradled the infant’s head, kissing her velvety cheek. “Two big brothers. My heart bleeds for you, girl. Your boyfriends will never have a chance.”

“Ha,” said Roark. “First they have to get past me.”

Pam sniffed. “Isn’t that the truth? The only thing that’s worse than an Irish dad is an Italian one, and damn if she doesn’t have both.”

“A lethal combination,” Roark said, taking one of the boys, “so I’d watch it if I were you.” He set the sleeping infant into a bassinet, then the other two. “I’m going downstairs to get some of that motor oil they call java. You two want anything?”

“I’d kill for a nice chardonnay,” Pam said.

He leaned in, kissing her thoroughly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Leslie watched the door shut. “There goes one happy man.”

“Ecstatic, more like it,” Pam said. She squeezed Leslie’s hand. “So how are *you*?”

How do you explain bitterness, rage and multiple scenarios of bloody revenge to someone so awash with happiness? *You don’t*, Leslie concluded, pulling up a chair. *You just make the best of it, then get the hell out.* “I’m all right.”

“Bullshit,” Pam said. “You look like hell. And you’re wearing two different shoes, in case you hadn’t noticed. So cut the crap and tell me what’s going on.”

Leslie dropped into the chair. “They took all the office equipment away today. And I got a letter from the court. All our assets are frozen because Ted’s considered a flight risk. They found a ticket to the Maldives in his briefcase.”

Pam stared at her. “But I thought all those threats to Gina were just bullshit. You mean he really wanted to kill her?”

“I think he’d like to kill himself now. Especially since they’re also tossing embezzlement charges at him. Seems he’s been getting creative with some funds at the law firm. But somehow the bastard managed to convince the judge to let him out with an electronic surveillance bracelet as long as he stays with his parents in Marlton.”

“That’s fifteen miles away. At least you won’t run into him at the supermarket.”

“Where I’d at least have the chance to run over him with my car.” Leslie’s gut roiled with anger and humiliation. Her marriage had been on the rocks for a long time, but now to lose her business, her savings, maybe even her home? All so her husband could pursue an obsession with a woman who didn’t even care if he were alive or dead? Logic told her Gina Bardone was as much a victim of Ted’s as she was, but Leslie couldn’t help hating her. Gina had ruined her life, and that was reason enough.

“Maybe if you had a new job...” Pam said.

“In this economy? That’s really funny.” Patrick gurgled, and Leslie reached idly behind her, rubbing his foot. “I know—maybe I’ll be like you and write a *New York Times* bestseller. I’ll call it ‘How my bastard husband screwed a blossoming political career to become a lying, cheating, Gina Bardone-stalking attempted murderer and

destroyed my life in the process.’”

“Maybe you ought to write that.”

“Too bad they took my computers away today. Otherwise I’d be at my desk right now—oh *damn*.” She thwacked her forehead. “They took that away, too.”

Pam sighed. “Listen, I have an idea. Well, actually, it wasn’t my idea, but—” Someone knocked on the door, then it opened and a woman stuck her head in.

“Hi, we just saw Roark, so Doug...” The woman’s gaze shot to Leslie. “Hey! Just the person—”

Leslie shot to her feet, twisting to Pam. “I’d better be going.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Pam said, clamping onto her wrist. “And I’m too goddamned weak to chase you down the hall.” She looked to the woman at the door.

“Come on in, Gina, and you...” She shifted to Leslie, “sit the hell down.”

Leslie sunk to the chair, her eyes dead-ahead as Gina went right to the babies.

“They’re beautiful,” she whispered, gently touching each of their heads. “You must be very happy.”

“And very tired. So, ladies?” Pam looked to each of them. “You’re going to have to make this quick.”

“Absolutely.” Gina went to the chair Roark had vacated, leveling her gaze into Leslie’s. “I’d like to make you a proposition.”

Leslie’s own narrowed. “A habit you acquired with my husband.”

“Not fair,” Gina said, her face reddening.

“Neither is what has happened to me, but you don’t see me tossing offers at you.”

“Leslie,” Pam said evenly, “will you shut the hell up and listen?”

She started to say something, then dropped it. “Pardon me. Do go on.”

Gina arched a brow but continued. “Look, I’m sorry about what’s happened, and I apologize for whatever part I played in it. But I would like to make it up to you.”

“Oh yeah? How? You going to get my business back? Unfreeze my assets? Get my name out of the press?”

“No, but I can offer you a job.”

“Really. Doing what?”

“Working for my old boss, Congressman Jack Falco.”

Every nerve ending flared. She blinked, trying to remain nonplussed. “You must be joking.”

“Hardly.” Gina crossed her legs, legs so long and shapely Leslie could almost get why Ted lost his mind. *Almost*. “He’s building a staff for his gubernatorial campaign headquarters right here in Riverboro, and he needs someone with your organizational skills. I told him you’d be perfect for office manager.”

Leslie’s fingers clawed into the armrest. His office manager was the last thing she wanted to be. “You did? Why? You know nothing about me.”

“Well, you had a very successful office support business, and I know you also have press experience. Don’t you blog for phillynights.com? And write a column for the South Jersey section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*?”

“Change that to *blogged* and *wrote*. Past tense since my dear soon-to-be-ex-husband lowered my name to just a tad above mud.”

“Look, the Congressman realizes what you’ve been through. All the more reason why he wants to hire you.”

“Is that a fact.” *The Congressman*. He couldn’t possibly have any idea what she went through, what she was going through now. And imagining him even remotely feeling sorry for her was enough to make her ill. Leslie rose, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “Tell the Congressman I appreciate his offer, but I’m going to have to pass.”

“Leslie, don’t be stupid,” said Pam. “You said yourself how hard it is to find a job these days.”

“I’ll take my chances.” She pecked Pam’s cheek. “Bye, sweetie. Your babies are lovely. Give Roark my best.”

Gina intercepted her at the door. “Leslie, please let me help you. No fooling, you’d be an asset to the Congressman. Now more than ever he needs to surround himself with competent people he can trust. He needs someone like you.”

“Like me?” She laughed. “Oh man, how funny is that?” She pushed past Gina, opening the door. “Listen, tell him something for me. Tell him not to trust *anyone*. Because if he does, there’s a good chance he could end up like me, and believe me, that’s not a place he’ll ever want to go.”

She didn’t wait for an answer; she didn’t even say goodbye. Leslie just walked out the door and down the hall, leaving the badge at the desk before she banged the down button at the elevator bank, finally figuring out that indefinable scent so permeating Pam’s room. It was joy—unmitigated, unadulterated joy, and she had to get as far away as she could before she choked on it.

* * * *

Leslie knew the hardest part about living in a town as gentrified as Riverboro was that it was just so damn cute. Multiply that by ten during the holidays. Not that she had

anything against cuteness: the slate sidewalks, antique streetlights, wrought-iron benches, corner parks, a mix of retail and residential and rail access all sidled up to a picturesque Delaware Riverfront, made for a very livable and walkable environment. But now, with the greenery and red ribbons and lights and Santas and menorahs permeating everything *ad nauseum*, she felt the worst kind of Scrooge. Because every year, her own storefront used to be festooned with greenery and red ribbons, and lights around her sign—PARKS BUSINESS SOLUTIONS—hanging just below the windows of her second-floor flat. But this year, less than two weeks before Christmas, it was dark and cold, and as empty as she felt inside.

She almost laughed. Funny, her offering to solve everyone else's business problems when she couldn't even fix her own.

There was a chill in the air, a gray dampness that given a few more downward notches in the thermometer promised snow, but that didn't stop Leslie from trailing the Riverwalk. There were still runners out on the path, moms with kids at school, self-employed—like she used to be—working their own schedule, people from the courthouse taking the air between sessions. And her. With nothing to do, no word processing to finish, no transcripts to edit, no fax machines ringing, no scanning, binding, graphics. No blog or column deadline. No more employees to lay off, no husband to wonder about. She walked and walked and walked, one sneaker, one loafer, her head in a gray, miserable fog.

No best friend to visit at her big, cozy home either. Pamela Flynn, now Carmelli, bestselling author, wife to Roark of Serious Joe, where she used to sip his wonderful coffee as she took a break from a business now dark and empty and gone. She found a

bench and dropped to it, fixing her gaze on the water, a coal barge closing in on the power plant upriver puffing dun-colored smoke. She watched the barge as its wake rippled toward the shore, idly wondering what it'd feel like if she tossed herself from it.

"Good God..." she groaned, dropping her head to her hands.

The Congressman.

She started, her breath hitching sharply. The last thing she wanted to hear was his secondhand offer of aid from Gina, especially when she knew it was more likely out of election-year guilt. Because everyone knew Jack Falco was a master at telling people what they wanted to hear, whether or not he delivered. Jack Falco was nearly everyone's idea of the Perfect Politician, someone whose face even those more likely to pick up the sports page than the front page knew. Because how many politicians could claim Calvin Klein model looks as well as model statesman standing? Who had dated more than a couple of Hollywood hotties, was regularly chased by TMZ and the tabloid press, made *People's* "Sexiest Man Alive"?

She could only think of one. Whom, try as she might, she couldn't get out of her head.

"Dammit!" she cursed, sitting up, gathering her scarf around her. She hated being this gullible, this typical. No better than a star-struck teenager. But for weeks now, as she suffered the humiliation and headlines of the Wronged Political Wife, she couldn't help dwelling on the first time she had met him a month and a half ago. A Democratic fundraiser, and all the stars were there, including her husband, Ted, whose own was steadily rising.

And with Ted a new member of the Congressman's campaign staff, they had been

invited to sit at his table, the man himself coming around to make her acquaintance. “Ah, the lovely Leslie.” He closed his hand over hers, his own hand warm, firm, slightly calloused—which, in truth, surprised her. “Your husband’s told me so much about you.”

“He has?” she had said. “Don’t believe a word of it.” Because even then, days before her sordid enlightenment, she had felt certain that if any opinions were going to be disseminated about her, the last person she wanted Jack to hear them from was Ted. As she looked up into his iridescent eyes, she knew she had to tell him everything about her herself. And what surprised her even more, he seemed like he’d actually listen.

“Your husband wouldn’t mind if I asked you to dance, would he?” Jack had asked after dinner.

She nearly jumped out of her chair. As she turned to look at him, his gaze fixed on hers, she’d soon learn that being startled by Jack Falco would become *de rigueur*. “Why, I—”

“Oh, go ahead, Les,” Ted said, glancing up from the latest poll figures scrolling on his iPhone. “You might as well dance with someone if it’s not going to be me.”

Jack leaned back on his heels, crossing his arms over what looked like a very taut chest. “Good God, Ted, what sane woman could resist that ringing endorsement?” He looked to Leslie, his hand out again. “I know I’m not much of a substitute for Teddy boy, but...”

Substitute for Ted? Leslie thought. *Damn, they weren’t even in the same hemisphere.* She slipped her hand in his. “I’ll try to contain my disappointment,” she said, letting him lead her out onto the dance floor.

It wasn’t easy to miss the veiled looks that followed them out there, a few

cameras flashing, deeming anyone caught on the Congressman's arm suspect. But if they were forming their opinions about Leslie, they would have to bank them for later. Because with her husband a well-oiled cog in the political machine, any life outside of Ted's orbit would have to wait until she spun out of it. Yet with his full agenda steadily making him more or less a boarder in their own home, she was already planning her escape. All she needed was the catalyst.

He turned when they reached the center of the floor, slipping his arm around her. "It's a slow one. Do you mind?"

Good thing she wore four-inch heels; she knew she was short, but still, she only reached to his shoulder. "Why—you want to wait for a fast one? Maybe do some crowd surfing?"

"Ha!" he laughed, dipping his head to hers, his hair black except for those white blazes at his temples. "Very funny, Mrs. Parks, but I never dance fast in public. Makes a politician look silly. Now, by myself?" He smiled, looking askance. "Give me some Green Day and I can slam with the best of them."

Leslie had a sudden vision of Jack in his boxers, a hairbrush-mic in his hand. *No—briefs*. Tight and translucently white, a bulge steadily— "Why, Congressman," she said, trying to ignore the way she was heating, "Are you a closet punk?"

"Am I?" He glided them around an older couple. "Why don't you tell me? My life's an open book. More than a million Google hits."

"That's a lot of transparency. I guess there's nothing about you we don't already know."

His eyes darkened. "They can only know as much as you let them see."

“So what you’re saying, Congressman,” Leslie said, flinching slightly as his leg brushed hers, “is maybe we don’t really know you at all.”

“A logical conclusion, Mrs. Parks,” he said, his hand a hot brand against her back. “And please call me Jack.”

One more glide had him pulling her closer against the hard length of his body, Leslie’s head swimming. All at once she felt giddy, girlish, drunk on the spicy scent of him, this poster boy for the hot young Democrats, his star rising as fast and furiously as any guitar hero. She felt a pull to him as irresistible as gravity, his mesmeric voice, his canyon-esque gaze—as heady and nearly inescapable as a tractor beam. But it was crazy and she knew it. She was no raw recruit in this game. This man had to be a little too smooth and slick to get as far as fast as he had, and she was smart enough to realize it. Still, there was something about him that no amount of reason or marriage vows could counter. She was inexplicably, quixotically drawn.

She swallowed. Hard. “I’ll call you Jack only if you call me Leslie.”

His hand tightened at her hip. “Sorry, can’t,” he said, his eyes flashing anger so quickly Leslie almost missed it. He pulled her even closer, his breath hot against her cheek. “You’re Mrs. Parks and I need to remember that.” The music stopped and his hold loosened, and before she knew it they were back at the table.

“Thanks,” he said, squeezing her hand for a moment before he let it go. “Enjoy the evening. There’s some folks I need to see.” And off he went, people gravitating to him like iron filings to magnets, cameras flashing as he was swallowed into the crowd.

Leslie looked to the chair he has recently vacated, then to her husband, chatting with a visibly agitated Gina Bardone, the big, blond man to her right glowering at an

oblivious Ted. There was something simmering between the three of them that she couldn't put her finger on. Not that it mattered. Because Leslie was quite sure if she grabbed her coat and walked out no one would even notice, except— Her gaze shot up and across the room and there he was, watching her, ignoring the half-dozen or so people vying for his attention. *He's watching me.* It was almost too bizarre.

Leslie straightened, tossing her head coquettishly. When she did, her shoulders shifted and her breasts slid beneath her gown, and all at once she had the wildest vision: of Jack's hands on her stroking, kneading, her own reaching beneath his starched shirt to the hot skin beneath, to the hard planes of his chest. But as enticing a vision as that was, she knew it would never be enough. Not until she found herself beneath him, Jack moving slowly, indescribably inside her. Then all at once, his face lit.

For a split second, Leslie truly believed their minds had met. That was, until she saw Jack break away from the group and move toward the woman fast approaching him, a woman Leslie was sure she had seen gracing the cover or home page of one gossip outlet or another. And in that illuminating moment, Leslie never felt more moronic, especially when the woman stepped into Jack's embrace, and his hands gravitated to the same anatomical spot at the small of her back where Leslie still felt his hot press on her own. She shifted against the back of her chair, trying to dispel it.

Fat chance, she thought, her anger rising.

That time she did grab her coat and purse, mumbling something to Ted about a cab, making toward the doors as fast as decorum would allow. She must have been dangerously close to losing her mind if she thought Congressman Jack Falco had ever entertained a seductive thought in her direction. It was an idea as ludicrous as the one

Gina Bardone tossed at her nearly six weeks later from the hospital room of a best friend now permanently and joyfully preoccupied. Both Pam and Gina, as well as all within their sphere, floated blissfully on a plane so high above her own reality, she couldn't even fathom it.

Leslie sprang from the Riverwalk's bench and bolted back into town. Never in her life had she hated her own species more, the cream of whom seemed to have evolved merely to make her life hell. And none more than Jack Falco, who she still couldn't get out of her mind. But she had to, because she was through with anything and anyone political. They were all as phony as the Hollywood types that flocked to them like buzzards to roadkill—a far more honest attraction, Leslie knew. And an accurate analogy.

She walked and walked until her legs ached and her breath came heavy, until her stomach caved from a missed breakfast that inched past lunch, until the futility of her situation was made only more apparent by its irony: that the one man who could help her was the only man her failing dignity couldn't bear to consider. Because dignity was all she had left, and never again would she lose it for a man whose own would always be more important than hers.

Soon she found herself back at her building, as empty and as bereft as before. What to do next? She hadn't a clue, solutions long swallowed up by angst. She propped one foot on the stoop, bent her head to her knee and choked back a sob. With no business and no money, soon she wouldn't even have a stoop to angst over. Behind her she heard a car stopping at the curb. She straightened to go inside. As she pulled the keys from her pocket, the car's door opened and closed.

"Mrs. Parks," she heard, a rich, sonorous voice.

She turned, her breath catching. *Jack Falco.*

Chapter Two

As Jack Falco stepped from the curb, as he came toward her, his eyes as green as the fir swags all around them, Leslie understood really for the first time why they called him “The Ladies’ Choice.” With his air of masculine elegance, considerable height and a presence so commanding she could almost imagine the traffic stopping, he was simply the most stunning man she had ever seen.

She turned from the stoop, quite baffled as what to say. So she fell back on what came naturally. “Congressman, if you want to get something Xeroxed, I have to tell you, I’m fresh out of toner. Fact is, I’m out fresh out of Xerox, too.”

“So I’ve heard,” he said, closing in on her like a panther stalking. “But that still doesn’t mean you don’t have a solution to my problem.”

“You’re wrong,” Leslie said, backing up atop a step, vainly trying to even the near-foot he towered over her. “I’m fresh out of solutions, too.”

“Now that’s where *you’re* wrong,” he said. “Because I think the solution to both our problems is standing right here with you.”

She flinched, unable to answer. Because it was so incredible, really, the fact he was even here. But then again, this personal touch was why he crossed party lines to win term after term with landslide votes. Leslie leveled her gaze to his, his sensual mouth crooking as he channeled every iota of his attention to her.

“I have nothing to offer you,” she said.

He leaned in, his rich scent flooding her senses. “Except everything,”

A shiver shot straight up her spine.

“Look, I was just about to have lunch, so I was wondering....” He inclined his head to O’Dooley’s across the street. “Word is they serve a killer corned beef. Any truth to that?”

If he was trying to throw her, it was working. Because just the thought of O’Dooley’s ambrosia on rye made her stomach rumble. She was only addicted to it. “Some.”

“Then join me,” he said, already backing up. “What do you have to lose except those hunger pangs?”

Jesus—he heard me? She’d have liked to crawl under the building. But she wasn’t that easily swayed. Being made a fool of once was a powerful talisman against becoming one again. She held her ground, latching onto the railing. “Congressman, if you think having me as a captive audience while you buy me lunch is going to change my mind, I’m sorry, but you’re mistaken.”

“No, I think you are. Who said anything about me buying?”

Leslie stared at him. “I—but—I meant—”

His grin was almost blinding. And, as Leslie quickly found out, totally disarming. “Oh come on,” he said, taking her hand, “it’s just lunch. Indulge me.” And before she knew it she was crossing the street alongside him.

O’Dooley’s Irish Pub was nearly her second dining room. She and Ted had spent their first night out there when they had moved to Riverboro four years earlier, and except for a rather dark spate of a few weeks involving Pam’s former boyfriend, the neighborhood local had always been her refuge. So she wasn’t surprised when a few heads turned as she entered, all because of who she was entering with.

“Hey, Les!” called the bartender, Mickey, his thick arms hoisting a wooden crate of ale. “Is it lunch you’re in for? Jimmy’s got some fresh just out of the pot.”

“Elaboration on just what it is that’s *fresh*,” Jack leaned in to whisper, “is, of course, unnecessary. I’m assuming they know you here.”

“Like family,” Leslie answered. She slid into a barstool, hoping her choice of seating would throw him off his aim. “Mind if we sit at the bar?”

“I was going to suggest it,” he said, sliding in beside her. “Can’t get the real feel of a place tucked away in a booth, you know what I mean? Besides,” he said, his gaze sweeping the nearly teeming dining room, “it’s not like we’re going to have the whole place to ourselves anyway.”

Leslie exhaled slowly; so much for that tactic. Mickey set down the case and came over.

“Now here’s a man whose hand I’ve been wanting to shake,” said Mickey, extending his. “Congressman, as soon as I get my citizenship, you’re the first I’m gonna vote for. The name’s Mickey McHugh.”

“Hello there, Mickey,” said Jack, shaking it heartily. “You promise me that vote, we’ll do your oath right in my office.”

“It’s a deal,” said Mickey with a laugh. “Hey, you shake like a real man. You wouldn’t happen to have any of the Irish in you, now would you?”

“Matter of fact, one of my grandmothers was an O’Donoughue. Straight from County Cork.”

“You don’t say. Where?”

He thought a moment. “I believe it was Kinsale, if I remember right.”

“Jaysus!” He slapped the rail. “My folks is from Oysterhaven. We’re practically kin.” He swept a glass atop the bar. “What’re you drinking, Congressman? This pint’s on me.”

He grinned. *Blindingly*, again, Leslie was not surprised to notice. “Now what do you think, Mickey?”

Mickey laughed, promptly pouring him a Guinness.

Jack folded his arms atop the bar, nudging Leslie’s elbow with his. “What about you? Too early in the day?”

“For what?” she said dryly. “I’ve no agenda but my own.” She looked to Mickey. “The usual, please. And a couple of corned beefs, too.”

The bartender nodded, sliding the Guinness to Jack before he drew out a spoon for Leslie’s Black and Tan. After he placed it before her, he left for the kitchen.

Jack turned toward Leslie. “There’s another reason why I came to see you today. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for what’s happened. I should’ve seen it coming and warned you.”

His sympathy was the last thing she wanted. She fumbled with the zipper on her coat. “You don’t have anything to apologize for. If the woman he was married to couldn’t figure out what he was up to, how could you?”

“They say the wife is always the last to know.”

She laughed harshly. “That’s a joke. I may have been married to him, but I hadn’t been his wife for a long, long time.” She looked up, her face heating. “I have no idea why I just told you that.”

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “I’m glad you did. Tell me anything you want.”

“Why?” she said, suddenly irritated.

“Because I’d like to get to know you better. Because I want to help you.”

She pulled her glass forward, taking a long pull. “I don’t need your help.”

“You sure about that?”

“Then I don’t want it.”

He regarded her for a moment. “You’re a hard case, aren’t you? Did you ever think for a moment that maybe you’d be helping me?”

“And why should I do that, Congressman?”

His eyes darkened. “I wish you’d call me Jack”

“And I wish everyone would just leave me alone.”

“Oh, right, that’s the best tack to take. Keep your head in the sand and hope everything will just go away. Because maybe one day you’ll wake up and life will be pretty and safe again. That’s going to work for sure.”

She glared at him. “Who the hell are *you* to give me advice? I’ve made it this far without anyone.”

“Because you’re sure doing great now.”

“Hey, I didn’t make my husband go off the deep end. He did it all on his own.”

“But he did it under your watch.”

“How dare you?” She jumped off the stool. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“No one,” he said, sliding off to tower over her. “At least not to you. But let me give you a little piece of advice. The secret to success is not really how much you accomplish as it is how well you delegate. You surround yourself with the best people,

from the bottom straight up to the top.”

He came around to face her, his arm half-caging her against the bar, his voice low and lethal. “Look, I’m sorry for what that bastard fuck of a husband did to you. And if he were standing right here I’d probably break his back. But I’m also not in the habit of giving charity to anyone unless they plan on giving me something in return. And you, my fine, talented...”—he looked her up and down, his other arm making the cage complete—“*constituent*, have something I most definitely want.”

He took a step back, his gaze never leaving hers. “But I also need someone with your abilities for my campaign headquarters, *Mrs. Parks*, and you need a job right away. So I’m holding open a ten o’clock appointment for you tomorrow morning, and if you’re as capable, efficient and whip-smart as my chief-of-staff tells me you are, you’ll be there on the dot.”

Leslie’s hand shot to the rail for support. “Why don’t you—”

“Ten o’clock,” he said, tossing a fifty to the bar. He walked out the door.

It wasn’t until he got into his car and pulled away that she felt her heart begin to slow down, after her brain and her mouth finally caught up with what she really wanted to say. But by that time it was too late.

“Call me Leslie,” she whispered, not that there was anyone left to hear.

* * * *

She had briefly considered a lipstick-red suit, but in the end, she decided on a subtle, conservative gray with a peplum waist, a high-necked white blouse, three-inch patent-leather pumps. She slipped into her coat, slung her purse over her shoulder, grabbed her portfolio. With her blond hair pulled up and her blue eyes a little clearer after

a decent night's sleep, Leslie looked the perfect professional.

Then why did she feel the perfect sell-out?

This thought stayed with her all through the five-block walk to the big three-story corner storefront that was slowly becoming FALCO FOR GOVERNOR headquarters. Because it was one thing to lose everything she had worked for for thirty-eight years: a business, a marriage, a life. And it was quite another to realize you were taking the easy way out from all of it. Because wasn't that what she was doing by even considering this job? Admitting that she had given up the fight? Should she be in court challenging everything her oily soon-to-be-ex-husband was subjecting her to, fighting him every step of the way. But like a good political wife, she had long fallen into the habit of standing alongside her man and smiling blandly, a *de rigueur* part of the background. She stepped around a greengrocer display of wreaths and poinsettias, huffing in disgust. Maybe she shouldn't be looking at it that way. Because perhaps it was the other side of the coin that was leading her toward the appointment at ten. Maybe there really wasn't anything left to fight for. Except maybe for her survival. To fight Ted in court would cost money and she was way beyond flat broke. And then there was—

The part too far below the surface to ever own up to—too elemental, too simmering, too beyond reason—and that was the Congressman himself. Leslie gathered her collar around her, a stiff breeze off the river making her shiver, yet that wasn't wholly due to the weather. More so the memory of being so close to him, how it made her ignore all the stellar legislation he had initiated for of all those tabloid things she had always heard about him. Like the way those cinematic eyes caught hers and held on, to how broad that taut body looked in a tux, to how that thrum of a voice vibrated through you to

places no politician had ever dared to go – at least in public.

“The Ladies’ Choice” was a perfect moniker for Jack Falco, and yet it wasn’t. Because Leslie knew, as she pulled open the door to his headquarters, that to be in caught in the Congressman’s thrall was hardly a conscious choice at all.

Inside was a large room, low ceilinged and raucous, full of peopled desks, ringing phones and campaign effluvia, TVs squawking with CNN, MSNBC, and New Jersey Network, the air permeated with the smells of old coffee, fresh ink and the long-forgotten memory of a good cleaning. For the couple of dozen or so workers scattered and chatting about the room, no one even noticed her except the unflappable-looking older woman behind the reception desk, who turned from her computer screen and, peering over the rim of her reading glasses, said, “May I help you?”

“I’m Leslie Parks, and I have a ten o’clock appointment with the Congressman.”

She glanced to her desk and back. “Oh, I don’t think so.”

Leslie straightened. “I assure you I do. The Congressman made it himself.”

The woman’s mouth crooked, sizing her up. “Now isn’t that so like the Congressman? Take a seat, Ms. Parks. His chief-of-staff will be right with you.”

“Chief-of—?” *Oh no.* Her stomach roiled with disappointment and dread. “But I made an appointment with him. Believe me, he...”

But the woman had already gone to her phone. “Your ten o’clock is here,” she said into it.

Leslie slunk back to a chair, the thought of facing Gina Bardone enough to send her bolting for the door. Instead, the reality of the \$77.53 in her wallet kept her firmly in place. So she focused on what was tucked in her portfolio, a resume she had brushed up

the night before, some of her best press clippings, instead of who was behind the office doors beyond. Then the phone buzzed at the reception desk.

“Sure,” said the woman. She looked to Leslie. “Back to the office on the right.”

“Thank you.” She snaked around the desks, still no one noticing her, to the far wall that housed three offices, all with blind-shaded windows to the left of their doors. She knocked at the one on the right.

“Come in,” a male voice answered.

She opened the door, her jaw nearly dropping. “*Lee*? You’re the new...?”

“I prefer aide-de-camp.” He grinned, his hands falling from behind his head as he tilted his chair back to the desk. “Well, come on in, darling. Fancy meeting you here.”

Lee Roland: state senator, pharmaceutical heir, party operative—and a player of the worst kind, through and through. His sexual exploits were legendary, but there was another thing Leslie knew well from her political days with Ted. Lee was savvier than the best of them and even smarter. He adjusted his Clark Kent glasses and leaned forward, his athletic shoulders flexing under his Oxford shirt as folded his hands atop a file. “So, Leslie, my sweet, how are you?”

Politically correct, he wasn’t. But if there was anyone who could get away with tongue-in-cheek condescension, it was Lee. “Well, gee, I’m living the life, now aren’t I?” she said. “Nothing like a family sex scandal to put the pink in your cheeks, don’t you agree?”

“Ha! There and a few other places. How is the old boy?”

“Rotting, hopefully.” Leslie did *not* want to talk about Ted. She cleared her throat. “So. I suppose you’d like to see my resume...”

“You know? I think I have everything I need right here.” He opened the file. “Now let’s see...BS in marketing, College of New Jersey, with a minor in professional writing. MBA Wharton School of Business. Dow Jones, then the *Wall Street Journal*, then *The Nation* magazine, some fancy-pants journalism and a lot of speechwriting tossed in.” He looked up. “And then you ended with Ledbetter/Davis Pharmaceuticals?” His brow lifted, looking up. “My, competition, how *dare* you?” And back to the file. “Then you died and went to Riverboro. My, my, sweetheart, what happened?”

She looked at him a moment, clearing her throat. “Temporary insanity, I guess. I married Ted.”

“Traded an MBA for an M-R-S.” He closed the file. “Jesus, who are you—Donna Reed? It’s a new century, darling, or haven’t you heard?”

“I have now. Believe me, I’ve come back to the future very quickly.”

He leaned back in his chair again, folding his hands behind his head. “So you started a office support business to keep close to hubby. Wrote his speeches, too?”

Another pause. “Occasionally.”

“And now instead of all that hellfire journalism and sweet talk, you’re pumping out puff pieces for the Philly press. What if I tell you I don’t give a damn the Please Touch Museum is featuring ferrets or reindeer or even The Claus himself this weekend?”

“I would say that’s your prerogative.” He was starting to annoy her. “How do you know all this about me anyway?”

He smiled, his teeth fairly glinting. “Because I’m in the game, sweetheart. Everybody even rimming it has a big, fat file. And I got the key. Matter of fact, a whole ring of them.”

“How comforting.”

“Ain’t it, though?” He dropped his chair to the floor and stood up. “Okay. Here’s the deal. This place is a mess, and since Gina seems to think you’ve got what it takes to straighten it out, we’re taking her word for it and putting it in your hands. It might not sound like much, but this is the heart of the whole campaign, and if you can get it to run smoothly, we’re hoping the rest of the offices will fall in line. For now your duties will be pretty standard, right from managing the staff to getting the payroll out, to making sure all the pencils are sharpened. Sound good?”

For this, I went to Wharton. “Go on.”

He came around the desk, half sitting on it. “Your direct boss will be Mallory Leary, the Congressman’s campaign manager, but don’t expect her to be here too much. This is her office we’re sitting in, hence the window. Yours is next door, sans window, of course. You’ll also be her assistant when she’s in town.”

“Then why isn’t she interviewing me?”

“Because darling, when it comes to the Congressman and any of his inner circle, as his chief-of-staff, the buck starts here. Your cut of which will be a fabulous \$800 a week, pre-tax. So!” He slapped his knees, standing up. “What do you say?”

“Well, I guess I can’t say much.”

“My guess is you shouldn’t have to say a thing. Because the job, whether you like it or not, is in the bag. The Congressman wants you, my darling. Wants you really badly, if you ask me. And if you *are* asking me, I’d say he has a thing for you. Either that or he just might be your white knight. Of course, knowing that does a number on my ego, because then what am I here for, besides to get your Social Security number?”

The Congressman certainly made that plain enough at O'Dooley's the day before, Leslie thought. But what did it mean, his wanting her? Surely he didn't need an MBA to keep his copiers in toner, to make sure all the admins punched the clock on time. Because it was ridiculous to think a man with Jack's sultry reputation would want her for anything beyond these office walls.

Still, it did feel pretty good to be wanted. And by a man like Jack—she smiled to herself, thinking of his body so close to hers.

Well, there were surely worse things.

“So, Leslie my sweet, what do you say?”

What could she say? Especially when the \$77.53 in her wallet were doing most of the talking. “I guess you've got me.”

“Good girl.” He shook her hand. “Now let's fill out some messy forms, and I'll get you your keys and alarm code so you can get set in your office. Mallory will be here tomorrow morning to fill you in further. Shall we say, nine?”

Nine, seven, two o'clock in the morning. What did it matter? “Sure,” she said. “I'll be there.”

* * * *

Beside her laptop, which Leslie managed to squirrel away, there were a few things too inconsequential for the liquidators to steal when they carted away her business. The next morning she managed to stuff into a couple of bags a calculator, an electric pencil sharpener, pictures, a Rolodex, a headset. Plus a dozen or so other things that would wipe the anonymity out of the little office and make it her own. She hadn't been able to sleep the night before anyway, more than once questioning the logic of taking this

job, so she decided to sneak in at seven before the office got populated, and get to know the lay of the place undisturbed. At the doorstep she reached into her pocket for the keys and a slip of paper with the alarm code, still unmemorized, on it. But when she opened the door and she stepped inside, curiously enough, no *eeeeeee!* sound greeted her. Which could only mean one thing: someone was already there, the answer of *who* coming quickly through the gray December dawn. The light in Mallory's office was on. Leslie shut the front door and aimed toward it. Now was as good a time as any to make her acquaintance.

But the closer she got, the more apparent it became that her new boss wasn't alone. Even closer, she realized that *being alone* had likely been Mallory's intention. Because by the time Leslie was less than a couple of yards away she heard a woman's voice pitch in a way she hadn't heard her own do in longer than she cared to remember. Which convinced her that maybe now would be a good time to turn tail and run. Then all at once Mallory's door flew open and there she was, her mouth caught in a pant, her face flushed, her fingers still doing up the buttons of her recently opened blouse.

And Jack Falco, standing right behind her.

Chapter Three

Leslie dropped the bags, bolting for the door.

“Oh shit,” breathed Jack, swiveling around Mallory.

“Hey!” Mallory called after him, doing up the last button. “Don’t forget to add what I said! A five percent increase will more than cover it! And don’t forget to schmooze Dr. Krause!”

“I’ll bear that in mind—*Christ!*” Jack cried, banging his knee against a desk as he made for the front door. He tried to ignore the pain shooting up his leg as he threw himself into his overcoat. If he had to imagine a worst-case scenario for Leslie to walk in on, this would surely rank near the top. She was already halfway up the block by the time he grabbed his briefcase and shot out to the sidewalk.

“Mrs. Parks!” he cried, half-limping after her still retreating back. He silently cursed his knee, bending to give it a quick rub. “Mrs. Parks—dammit! Don’t make me chase you, though I will if I have to!”

When she stopped at the corner light, he could see her shoulders slump. Then slowly she turned, her face a cold, businesslike blank, *apropos* steam from the frosty morning shooting from her nostrils. With her uptwisted hair loosening a few strands, her tight little body wrapped in a fitted red coat, those perfectly-shaped legs ending in the kind of pumps that made men break out in a cold sweat, he didn’t care if her eyes were narrowing into an icy blue glare. Matter of fact, he kind of liked it.

Nothing said, “I care” like a look of complete loathing.

“Thank you,” he said. “Mind telling me where you’re going?”

She appeared at a loss for words, blushing furiously. “I had thought I’d get to work early to set my office up, but apparently that wasn’t a good idea. I apologize.”

God, she was adorable. “And what exactly are you apologizing for?”

She stared at him, incredulous, blushing even deeper. “Because obviously...” She swallowed. “I, uh...interrupted—”

“My campaign manager, Mallory Leary, briefing me for a speech I’m giving this morning while she was trying to change her clothes for an appointment she’s already late for. See, she’s a gym freak, and usually her husband waits for the nanny so she can go every morning, but this week he’s in Houston on business, so she’s been kind of thrown off schedule.” He took a step closer. “That’s what you mean, right? I mean, you couldn’t possibly believe I was—”

“Of course not,” she said pointedly, pursing her lips. “Your explanation was an obvious conclusion. Silly me.”

“Mrs. Parks, there’s nothing silly about you. Presumptive, maybe. But silly, never. Now. Have you had your breakfast?”

She stamped her foot, shivering slightly. Jack felt a twinge deep within his groin. “No.”

“Serious Joe is just around the corner, but first your cell phone.” He held out his hand. “Please.”

She looked at him quizzically, but digging in her purse, produced it.

Jack went straight to her contacts, punching in some numbers. “Actually, your coming in early saved me calling you, which I was just about to do.” He handed her back her phone. “There, now you have my number, so if there’s ever again any question of

what you should or should not do, I'm only a speed dial away. Now, let's get some coffee. We have a long drive ahead of us." He started around the corner.

"What do you mean? Where're we going?"

"Centenary College up in Hackettstown. A symposium on stem cell research, and you've got a mess of a speech to clean up for me along the way. And it's a big one, too. If I blow this one, I could do enough damage for ten years."

"Stem cells! What do I know about stem cells?"

"Not asking for research, Mrs. Parks, just editing. My people told me you know a thing or two about speechwriting as well as journalism, or were they wrong? Because this is a tough crowd I have to convince, private labs who've been out of practice for a long time due to the federal restrictions. I'm writing a bill to get more funding which will directly benefit New Jersey, so it's got to be absolutely convincing. Me and three other writers have been trying for a week, but we still haven't been able to get it right. So you'd better tell me now if you're not up to it."

Now she was chasing after him. "If you're trying to scare me, Congressman, I have to tell you right now—"

"Oh Mrs. Parks..." He sighed. "When are you going to call me Jack?"

* * * *

Gina hadn't been kidding, Jack thought, reading the last line of his speech, the paper still warm from the printer. *The woman's an absolute miracle worker.*

Jack's former chief-of-staff had done her research well when she dug into Leslie's qualifications. Turns out writing speeches for the executives she worked for barely nicked the tip of the iceberg. As a freelance speechwriter, she had written brilliant and

biting oratory for the best of them, including the high muckety-mucks at several Fortune 500 companies, as well as a few former and fellow members of Jack's own House of Representatives. As he stood in the wings waiting to be introduced, as he pictured Leslie beside him in the car, her attention funneled into the laptop screen as she tapped wildly away, he couldn't help but think: *why the hell would someone with this amount of talent bury herself with Ted in Riverboro?*

It was a quandary for sure. Because Leslie was so far above being an office manager, he was truly embarrassed for asking. Even so, he didn't regret it. Because ever since he'd met her a few weeks back, he couldn't get her out of his head.

He knew he had a reputation as a ladies' man, and it would be stupid to think she hadn't heard it. But there was something about her, something in the way she looked at him, in the sound of her voice, in the way her body moved when she curved her legs against her chair, that drove him to distraction. That fascinated him. That made him quite certain that if he didn't have her soon, he'd go completely out of his mind. All at once the tiny hairs prickled on the back of his neck, and when he looked up there she was, coming out of the shadows.

"How is it?" she asked matter-of-factly, her hands folded in front of her. "You're not going to throw it at me, are you?"

Jack laughed softly; he wanted to throttle her. Because this self-deprecation had to be an act "You're joking, right?" The audience applauded, and he knew he only had a minute before he'd go out. He went to her, her face passive yet expectant.

"This..." He held up the roll of papers. "Is quite frankly the best piece of speechwriting I've ever read. It's tight, succinct, funny when it needs to be and peppered

with just the right amount of pathos. How the hell did you get this out of that mess of rewrites and Post-it notes?"

She shrugged. "I just tossed out the chaff and kept the wheat."

"Mrs. Parks," he said, leaning in, her scent so clean and inviting he wanted to take her right there, "you absolutely saved me. I owe you big time."

Her luscious mouth crooked. "I'll keep that in mind."

They were introducing him but he couldn't drag himself from her. "Wish me luck."

"Since you're going out on stage, I think the correct thing to say is 'break a leg.'"

Was he mistaken, or was she softening? "You wait right here."

She nodded. "Absolutely."

If someone were to ask him how the speech went, he honestly wouldn't know how to answer. Even though he had delivered it with his usual energy and attention to the audience, it was almost as if he'd been working on autopilot. Because even though Leslie had said quite adamantly she knew practically nothing about stem cells, he couldn't help feeling like a conduit for her own passion. And when he finished to a standing ovation, he nearly had to restrain himself from dragging her out there with him.

Jack returned to her waiting in the wings. "I think it went well," she said.

"Well? *Well?*" He nearly laughed out loud, flinging his hand toward the stage. "Will you listen? They're *still* applauding! You're a genius, you know that?" He wanted to lift her up, swing her around, bury her beneath him. Instead he grasped her by the shoulders, planting a quick kiss on each cheek. "Thank you!"

She seemed stunned when he stepped back, her hand idly going to her cheek.

“You’re welcome...I think.”

He was instantly horrified. What did he just do? “That was completely inappropriate. I apologize. Please believe me, it’ll never happen again. I’m so—”

“Don’t,” she said, stepping forward. “You have nothing to apologize for. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

He looked down on her, her eyes so clear and intent he felt inexplicably drawn, and it was then that he knew the only variable in his conquest of this delectable woman was *when*.

“So you’re saying that *this* wouldn’t be a surprise at all...” He arched toward her.

“Congressman!”

They both flinched, turning to the man coming at them from the stage. He bounded over, his hand extended. “That was simply the best argument I’ve heard on totipotents yet!”

Jack beamed, shaking his hand. “Thank you, Dr. Krause. I wouldn’t be writing the bill if I didn’t believe in it.” He looked to Leslie. “And this is the woman who made it all so convincing. My speechwriter, Leslie Parks.”

She looked to Jack, seeming startled for a moment before extending her hand. “A pleasure, Dr. Krause,” she said, smiling warmly.

He glanced to Jack and back. “Oh, she must be good. Who ever owns up to not writing their own speeches?” He shook her hand. “Great job. We’re sure to get this bill passed now. So, are you going to the reception?”

“Of course,” Jack said.

“Then come with me. There’s a couple of things I’d like to ask you about before

you get mobbed.” The older man slipped his arms into Jack’s and Leslie’s. “So do you actually think you have enough votes to get this past the...”

* * * *

He nearly kissed me. Leslie touched her cheek. *Again.* She watched Jack from the other side of the room, his hand turning to make an animated point, the crowd steadily thickening around him, the cameras flashing away. She sipped a cup of tea, too jazzed to eat anything more, supremely grateful for Dr. Krause. Because if Jack had succeeded, she knew one thing for certain: she wouldn’t have been able to stop with a kiss. No sense in denying it: she wanted him so badly, her bones ached. She set the cup down, her jaw clenching.

And the only thing that hurt more than that was the fact she could never have him.

Because that was one place she could never return to.

Hadn’t she learned her lesson with Ted? It was bad enough she’d allowed herself to take Jack’s dare and write a speech again, but to get involved with him? That would be crazy for sure. Still, as she caught his gaze from across the long room, as she felt it reach around and pull her toward him, how long would she honestly be able to resist? Not long, and she knew it. But neither could she afford to quit this job. Never in her life had she needed an income more. So, realistically, there really was only one thing to do. Keep it public, and never, never private. That is, if she made it home in one piece.

Somehow Jack managed to extract himself from the throng and was making his way toward her, and Leslie couldn’t help but marvel. He was such an incredibly handsome man, and the fact he seemed to want her was nearly incomprehensible. Which only made what she knew she had to do even harder.

“There’s the man of the hour,” she said. “You’re like the geek poster boy.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t tell anyone, but half the time I have no idea what they’re talking about. Thanks to you, they think I walk on water.”

It surprised her how good it felt to hear that. “You’re welcome, I’m sure.”

An attendant came up behind him with their coats. “You ready to take off?” Jack said.

“Yes,” she said, reaching for hers. But before she could, Jack took it, holding it out as she slipped her arms into it. “Don’t turn around, but there’s some press in the room dogging me, so we have to sneak out the back. Come on.”

As if she had a choice. He was already tugging her out of the room. The reception had been in one of the older buildings, the way to the back a mix of winding halls and alcoves, her whole body tingling when he suddenly stopped at a particularly shaded one, a door out, just across.

“They’re bringing the car around,” he said, glancing out the window. “It shouldn’t be a couple of minutes.”

Then why was he still holding my hand? She looked to it, then back to him, his eyes so fixed on hers they had gone a deep, mossy green. “I’ll take this back now,” she said, tugging slightly.

He let go like burned. “Christ, I’m sorry,” he said, running his own through his thick hair. “I’m really living up to my rep, aren’t I?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Leslie said, leaning into the alcove. “What *is* it they say about you?”

He arched a brow, his mouth crooking sardonically. “Oh come on, where’ve you

been, in a vacuum? Don't you read the tabloids? Surf the gossip blogs? I'm the mack daddy of Capitol Hill."

"You?" Her face squinched. "I don't see it."

"You must be joking." He straightened, throwing out his chin. "Notice the commanding height, the chiseled features, the sophisticated graying at the temples, the—"

"Self-deprecating, aw-shucks attitude."

He grinned, sidling closer. "My most lethal attribute. Women become putty in my hands."

"Where you mold them into straight Democratic voters." *Where they'd probably jump off a cliff if you asked them.* She caught his scent: spicy, clean, deeply masculine. *And I'd probably follow.* "It's all in the ulterior motive."

"Nothing ulterior about it. I've never been too proud to beg." He leaned in even closer. "What do I have to do to get your vote, Mrs. Parks?" he asked, his voice smoky. "What will it take to get you on my side?"

Good God, she was no better than the rest of them. Because this quickly, this easily, she was snared. "You've always had it," she said softly. "You know that."

"Do I?" All at once his hand tightened around hers and he pulled her to him, every ounce of her reserve dissolving.

"Leslie, you're wonderful..." he murmured, his mouth falling to hers.

When he kissed her it was like a thousand sparks igniting, all reaching toward a single point of contact. Instantly he found hers and she melted against him, her mouth opening to draw him in deeper. He tasted hot and sweet and insistent, her hand curling

around his neck as he pulled her against the hard length of his body, her own weakening with the knowledge whatever pledge she had made earlier was just about to be broken.

Outside a car squealed to the curb and she flinched, breaking away. “Leslie,” he said, even smokier than before, “tell me that wasn’t a mistake.”

It was, but now wasn’t the time to admit it. “Even if it was...” she said, breathless, “I don’t care.”

He exhaled roughly and kissed her again, this time dropping any pretense of propriety. When he pulled her to him, she could feel the steel shaft of his cock against her belly. *It’s been so long...too long.* She slid her hand to it, and squeezed.

“Leslie...” he groaned against her mouth.

She bit the side of his lip, tasting blood, and when she did, when he snaked his hand beneath her coat and up the curves of her bottom, when each stroke sent her flaming in response, she knew she’d reached the point of no return. “Let’s get out of here.”

He broke their kiss, his brow arching as he looked down on her. “Yes. Let’s.” Again he took her hand and they fled out the door to the car.

Somehow they found their way out of town, her hand on his leg and his between hers, and on a back road into a state park. “Stop,” Leslie said, and he pulled the car aside a clump of conifers, half-hiding them. Before he could even put the car into park she had her hand on his zipper and yanked it down, his huge cock still growing as she curled her hand around it. As he stared at her, his gorgeously stunned face a mix of breathless anticipation and lust, never had she felt more powerful. She opened her mouth and took him fully down her throat.

He grunted, his head arching back to the headrest, his hand snaking between them

toward her pussy. She pushed him away, pressing his arm against the seat. This was all about him now, and she wanted to fully concentrate. When his hand receded and fell to stroke her back, she mouthed him up and down until she finally rested her lips against his glistening tip, her tongue dipping into the tiny opening to taste just a bit of release. She swirled around it, nipping, sucking, Jack groaning her name softly as his hips swayed slightly. Leslie gently rolled his balls between her fingers before she tongued her way down his cock to take them into her mouth.

“Good God...” he moaned, the tight upsweep of her hair loosening in his hands. When it collapsed, he gathered it up and let it spill around his fingers, his warm touch sending shivers through her rapidly dampening groin. She let his balls slip from her mouth to lick and kiss her way back to the tip of his cock, his breath coming in short gasps as she once again took it down her throat. As she arched up and drove her lips down his shaft, again and again and again and even more, as she slid her hands into his trousers, as his smooth ass tightened against her palms, as his fingers stabbed into her scalp, she grew even wilder for the taste of him, his scent like ether to her brain.

Faster and faster she went, her tongue tracing the tight cords of his veins, his cock growing even hotter and harder and beginning to pulse, until suddenly she couldn't think anymore, her whole body becoming a single-purpose organism strictly made to bring him pleasure, bring him to his knees. She didn't know where such a thought came from, and in many ways it horrified her. But when his salty-sweet come began to ooze from his cock, and her own pussy was way beyond throbbing, she couldn't help but feel a sense of triumph, especially when his hand shot to the steering wheel for support and he exploded into her mouth, coming and coming until he slumped in the seat, his head dipping to kiss

Leslie's neck. After the last of it, she let go, panting, her head falling against his thigh.

They were silent for a few moments before he grasped her by the shoulders, raising her mouth to his. "You beautiful woman, you," he whispered, and kissed her deeply, cradling her in his arms. When he broke their kiss he simply held her, looking down, Leslie feeling breathless and overwhelmed, his eyes bright and shimmering.

He traced a finger down her cheek. "Believe me when I tell you this. I've never had a woman make feel like you did just now."

That gave her an unexpected twinge of pleasure, but still, she couldn't help saying, "Like I said before, you already have my vote."

He smirked. "You idiot." And he kissed her, even deeper than before, his hand falling to her hips. "Now I'll return the favor."

Not that it took much. She was already on fire. Because when his hand slid up her dress and down under her panties, when his fingers stroked around the periphery to suddenly tweak what was already swollen and throbbing, all it took was a couple of deft flicks of her clit and his finger diving inside her slick cove to send her arching against his hand, her own orgasm wracking through her with such seismic force, if he hadn't held her down she would've shot through the roof.

"Jesus, Jack..." she said, astounded at her own speed.

"Aw, that was too easy," he said, smoothing her dress. He kissed her quickly. "And I didn't even get a chance to taste you. Why is that?" he said, pulling her close, kissing her again. "Could it be you want me as much as I want you?"

Obviously, Leslie thought, knowing what they just did couldn't even come close to how badly she wanted him. Because within this physical act, Leslie discovered that it

was so much more than that, so much more complex she couldn't bear to examine it any further.

A car cruised by, slowly, before speeding up. They looked at each other, Jack gritting his teeth at the obvious. A man sitting by himself in an idling car half-hidden by a clump of trees was more than likely not by himself at all. Leslie twisted away, sitting up.

"We'd better go," she said, gathering her combs as she pulled her hair up.

He put the car in gear, slipping his hand to the back of her neck. "I like your hair down. It makes you look even hotter than you already are."

She smiled, feeling her cheeks heating as she stabbed the combs into her hair. "It makes me look like I'm twelve."

He traced his thumb to the top of her vertebrae, leaning in. "It makes me wonder what you'd look like with it spilling across my pillow."

She shivered with surprise; what a wonderfully romantic thing to say. Then she stiffened with the realization: *What the hell was she doing? What the hell had she done?* She had just pulled a Lewinsky on the man ultimately responsible for her husband being in jail. Not like it wasn't Ted's fault, and it wasn't because of Jack that Ted was in there, but the six degrees of separation were surely down to two or three. Not to mention that this man was her boss, and she had yet to file for divorce. One couldn't get more cliché than that. Or any more ridiculous. What had just happened between them was definitely a serious lapse of judgment, and no way could she allow it again. She needed to stay far away from people like Jack Falco. As far away as she could get.

She inched away and into her seat belt. "For both our sakes, I think we'd better forget about what just happened."

He turned back onto the road. “Leslie, what exactly do you think that was? Tell me the truth.”

She looked at him, almost coldly. “A random act of sex? A hit-and-run blow job? I don’t know.” She shrugged. “You tell me.”

“Is that all you think it was to me?” He shot her a glare. “Like it didn’t mean anything?”

“Oh, I’m sure it meant something. I give superior head. How would you gauge it against your other conquests, Mr. Mack Daddy of Capitol Hill?”

His face turned red and he stared at her with such intensity, she felt a chill wash through her. “Why you’d want to piss me off after what we just did together, what I thought of as the beginning of something special, is beyond me. But I’ll tell you what, Mrs. Parks. If it takes me going crazy, I’m going to find out why. And I’m going to change your mind.”

He stomped the gas, burning out onto the highway.

Chapter Four

Jack pulled to the stop sign. “All right,” he said, “I’ll admit defeat. I have no idea where we are.”

Leslie glanced to her left. He was so stunningly handsome, especially still awash in the afterglow of their encounter, that she could hardly look at him. She swallowed hard, smiling blithely. “They have a modern remedy for that.” She pointed to the dashboard. “It’s called a GPS.”

“Right. Because without them everyone used to just wander around aimlessly. There’s a map in the glove box, if you don’t mind.”

But he could also be a very strange man. He drove a Ford Edge hybrid, had a laptop plugged into his AC outlet, his BlackBerry in constant contact with Lee and Mallory—but he wouldn’t program the GPS. As she twisted the latch, she had a feeling there was another issue on which he’d be just as outdated: her. It had been a strangely confining last half hour, with Jack running through a series of heavy sighs and benign conversation starters, all for which she gave one- or two-word responses when she bothered to respond at all. *I’m such a bitch*, she thought, rifling through the box, but she couldn’t help herself.

Taking it any further with Jack could only end up disaster.

“Got it,” she said, pulling out the map.

“Open it and try to find where the hell we are.” He glanced to his left. “If we turn onto this road we’d be on Route 513.”

“And that would take us toward Route 29.”

His eyes lit. “And Frenchtown.” He put the car in park. “Let me see that.”

She passed the map to him, watching his brow furrow as he scanned. Her body was still tingling where he touched her, some primal response deep within aching for him to do it again. She sighed inwardly. *Why is my life so complicated?*

He folded the map, tossing it to the seat as he pulled out his BlackBerry and dialed. “You hungry?”

Considering all she’d had was coffee and a few sips of tea, and it was almost two o’clock—“I think I could eat something.”

He grinned. “So could I.” He put the phone to his ear. “Ned, please. It’s Jack.” He grinned even wider. “Right, but don’t tell anyone.” He waited a couple of beats. “Ned! How are you? You got the variance? Terrific! Why am I not surprised?” More beats. “Yes, famished, in fact. And I’d like it if you could...” His hand reached to Leslie’s and he idly gave it a squeeze, the gesture sending a warm rush through her body. “Right. We’ll pull up to the back. I’d appreciate it. See you in a few.”

As he set the phone down, she said, “What are you up to?”

He turned to her, his arm reaching to her headrest. “I have a very good, very discreet friend of mine who owns an inn in Frenchtown, who not only makes excellent spinach salad and beef-barley soup, but will serve it to us in our own private room where I’d really like to... *Leslie...*” He leaned in, his nose just gracing the line of her cheekbone, Leslie shivering with heat and the rich scent of him. “I want you to tell me what happened before was a mistake,” he whispered, kissing the edge of her ear. “If you tell me that, if you tell me you don’t want me, I’ll drive straight to Riverboro and never bother you again.”

She gripped the edge of the seat. “Jack...” she groaned, her neck arching, “I don’t know if it’s such a good...”

“Oh, it’ll be good,” he said, trailing tiny kisses down her throat. “I promise you. As long as you promise me it’s what you want. If you can’t do that...” He opened a couple of buttons on her dress and kissed the swell of her rapidly rising breasts. Leslie gasped at the response of her own traitorous body. “I can’t take you where I know we both want to go.”

He lifted his head and looked at her, those green eyes both luminous and smoldering, and she felt herself melt. “Hurry up and get us there before I change my mind,” she said.

“Oh sweetheart,” he said, giving her leg a squeeze, “you’d better strap yourself in. We’ll be there before you know it.”

* * * *

Jack parked the car in The Crown and Fife’s small garage at the edge of what must be a lush garden during the three other seasons. He made a quick phone call and soon after, the back door opened.

“Hello, Jack!” said a rotund, rosy-cheeked man, handing Jack a key. “Your lunch will be up in about twenty minutes.” He looked to Leslie. “Well, hello there. I’m Ned.”

“I work for him,” she blurted, immediately knowing how stupid that sounded. “I mean—”

“She means you’re absolutely too kind,” said Jack. “And don’t forget to add some of that killer tiramisu for dessert.”

Leslie grinned. “Yes, that’s what I meant—” But Jack had already grasped her

hand and suddenly they were rushing up a narrow staircase to a door at the top. Jack opened it into a hallway, the only room on the left: the Royal Drum Suite. He jammed the key in the lock and tugging her inside, slammed the door behind him.

After that, it didn't matter: her disastrous past, her marriage to Ted, the fact she was broke and dependent on this job, or that after today, no matter what Jack promised, all she'd really be was another notch in his bedpost. But maybe that was all right. Maybe that was all she needed now. Because at that moment it was freezing out and it had begun to snow, but inside the Royal Drum Suite a fire was blazing, the four-poster feather bed looked inviting, and she was alone with the one man in the world who could turn her into a quivering, breathless, fiery mess with a glance of those green eyes alone.

She opened her coat, dropping it to the floor. And jumped in his waiting arms.

He caught her, kissing her hard. He sloughed off his coat and jacket and whirled her around to the side of the bed, pressing her back against it. "Leslie," he said huskily, yanking her combs out, her blond hair spilling across the bedspread. "That's the way I want to see you," he said, loosening his tie. He arched over her, digging his fingers into the golden strands, trailing kisses down her neck to where the two buttons of her dress still were open. He flicked the rest, down to her waist, her heavy breasts heaving under her tight lace bra.

If he touches me, I'm going to explode, she thought, watching him, his eyes fixed on her, unmoving. He raised his hand, letting it hover just above her tight, pebbly nipples, bracing himself over her. She could feel the heat coming off his body just an inch or two away, and she broke out in a sweat as he bent to a nipple, his teeth nipping her through her bra. She jumped and he laughed throatily, sliding her dress up her leg. Her breath

came in short gasps. He ran his hand over the tops of her stockings and to the straps of her garter belt, expertly slipping each fastener open. His hands were hot, electric, as he glided them down each of her legs and slipped off her stockings but returned her pumps to her feet. Leslie writhed as he reached beneath the black lace of her belt to her panties, under which her skin lay moist and begging for his touch.

“I don’t think you’ll need these,” he said, sliding her panties down, arching over her to lick and flick each of her nipples. She flinched, squeaking, an electric charge shooting straight to her pussy. “That’s what I want to hear.” Then he fell to his knees.

She knew what was coming—which no doubt would be *her* in record time—but when he gently pushed apart her legs and his tongue first flicked the swollen knob of her clit, in no way did that prepare her for the firestorm that no doubt lay ahead. Because as she gripped the bed’s fabric, her hands fisting coverlet, her pumps digging into the mattress as Jack swirled and licked and torturously consumed her, never in her life had she ever been made to feel as magnificently as she did right then. Never had anyone been as expert at it as Jack. As his tongue flicked her clit, as he slid a finger deep within her, drawing it slowly in and out, in and out, her core wet and hot and tightening around him, she felt herself rising toward completion, degree by exquisitely painful degree.

“Oh Jack...” she moaned, “please don’t tease me. I can’t stand it, I’m ready to...”

He kissed the inside of her thigh, his thumb flicking, flicking, flicking. “You’re ready to...what?” His finger reached in so deeply, her hips shot off the mattress.

“I’m ready to...*oh God!*” She threw back her head and suddenly she was coming, wave after glorious wave so intense she could barely hear Jack whispering encouragements, Jack ripping open a packet, Jack nudging then thrusting his prodigious

cock inside her, filling her so deeply she thought she'd shatter from the impact.

"Jack!" she cried, her hands flying to his hips.

"Can you feel me inside you, Leslie?" he said, pumping her, his cock slamming into her with such force he had to kiss away her cries, swallowing them with his own. It wasn't a question of how many times he made her come; when she started, she just couldn't stop. Never in her life had she been fucked as completely, and it really was too much—a pleasure damn near excruciating. But there she was, rising again, just as Jack found his own climax, his neck arching back, his eyes fluttering closed, his mouth opening to first spill her name before it froze in a silent gasp, his cock pulsing to empty itself deep within her. When he finally stilled, she could still feel herself thrumming with the last throes of pleasure.

"Jack..." she murmured, breathless, her sweat-slick chest heaving.

He smiled, dropping to rest on his arms, his cock still buried inside her. "That was wonderful, sweetheart," he whispered, kissing her deeply. "A bit quick, but I promise next time I'll take longer."

She laughed softly. "I think any longer would kill me, but yeah, it was pretty great."

He smiled even broader, stroking her hair. "*Great*. I like that. *Momentous* would've been better, but I can live with *great*."

She raised her arms over her head and stretched languorously. "Listen, mack daddy, I haven't been laid in more than a year. I would've settled for average."

"More than a year?" His eyes widened and he kissed the inside of her arm. "Jesus, we've got a lot of lost time to make up for." A knock came at the door. "But not at the

moment, obviously.” He pulled himself from her.

“I’ll be right back,” she said and, kicking off her shoes, scuttled to the bathroom.

After the door closed, slipping her clothes off, she caught herself in the mirror: her hair in a tangle, her face flushed, a pair of passion bites darkening the swell of her breasts. A warm rush of pleasure washed over her. What a mess of contradictions she was. She was like a smoker in denial. She knew Jack was bad for her, but she couldn’t help herself. With every taste of him, she wanted him even more. She draped her clothes over a chair and, pinning up her hair, stepped into the shower.

She had hardly picked up the soap when she heard the curtain slide open and Jack stepped inside. And when she turned to face him, the shock of it nearly had her slumping against the slippery tile. Because she hadn’t quite been prepared for the magnificence that was this man’s body, which, after two nearly completely clothed encounters, still left her basically ignorant of it. He was broad and taut and tightly muscled, looking more like an athlete than a desk and podium jockey, his height towering over her to make her feel nearly Lilliputian.

“You’re so—*big*...” was all she could say.

He eyed her up and down and back. “And you’re so beautiful,” he said, lifting her up to kiss her. She wrapped her legs around him, his hands cradling her bottom. “As the more cornier among them would say, ‘you’re so cute I’d like to stick you in my pocket.’”

She kissed him. “I’ll settle for you’d like to stick me.” Obviously. He already had the condom on. *Presumptuous of him, wasn’t it?* Not really, if she thought about it. Wasn’t that fact that she was *at the Inn* an open invitation? She pulled back slightly and impaled herself, gasping again at the sheer length and breadth of him. Jack fucked her

slowly and sweetly, his tongue exploring hers as he kissed her just as leisurely, yet she couldn't help coming just a couple of minutes into it. After the second time, not a minute later, she felt so guilty she said, "Oh go ahead. Indulge yourself. Lunch will get cold if you don't anyway."

He grinned. "I'd eat it after it turned to ice cubes if it'd mean I'd get to stay inside you a little longer, but then again..." He sped up. Considerably. "You do feel so damn fucking *good*..." He braced her against the wall, Leslie gripping his shoulders as his cock rammed in and out, both of them gasping against each other's mouths as their orgasms took them. When she finished Leslie slumped, spent, against him. He kissed her and pulled himself from her, lowering her to her feet.

"I can't get enough of you," he whispered into her hair.

"Then it's a good thing you come so prepared," she said, rolling the condom from him, trying to tamp down the thought that made it to the surface anyway. She dropped the wad of latex to the rim of the tub. "Or had you planned to seduce me all along?"

He tipped her chin up to him. "Listen, I've been planning to seduce you since the moment I first saw you, but that's got nothing to do with it." He crooked his head toward the sink. "This inn's a temple to safe sex. Ned's got every medicine chest stocked."

"How convenient," she said, looping her arms around his neck. "I guess you bring all your chickies here."

"Sweetheart, you talk too much." He dipped his head and kissed her, so sweetly Leslie nearly forgot he evaded the question. Not that it was a question at all, or any of her business. She reminded herself she was having a tryst, an afternoon delight, a little erotic amble off the beaten path with a man who she'd been lusting after anyway. And it

wouldn't ever get any deeper than that. *Ever*.

They dried each other, then slipped into the Inn robes hanging in the bedroom closet, pulling a big wingback chair and the rolling table with their lunch before the roaring fireplace. After Jack lowered himself into the chair and Leslie perched atop his lap, they ate crocks of thick beef-barley soup, ripping off pieces of still-warm crusty bread to butter and slip into each other's mouths.

"Oh man, this bread's delicious..." Leslie cooed as Jack buttered another chunk, holding it to her lips. But just as she made to nip it, he suddenly pulled it back.

"Not so fast," he said, "you're already eaten half the loaf. I think this one's for me."

"But it's my turn!" Leslie said. "Can I help it if your pieces are so big?"

"Sweetheart, sometimes it's not the meat, it's the motion," he said, opening the front of her robe. He pushed the sides back until one of her breasts lay exposed, Leslie watching him in silence, her breath rising. When he touched one of her nipples, it hardened instantly.

He held one breast, slowly kneading it, working the nipple with his thumb before he raised the hunk of bread to it. Deftly, he slid the buttered end around her areola until gleamed with the oily shine of it. Then, slipping the bread into Leslie's mouth, he bent to take the nipple in his.

At first his tongue worked the butter clean off of it, licking until all that remained was a tiny rosebud of a bruise and Leslie's obvious appreciation. Then, in an apparent quest for parity, he opened her robe further and gave the same attention to the other breast, leaving another rosebud bruise and Leslie groaning his name. She believed he was

teasing her again. Her pussy was dampening, soaking into the robe. His erection started making it a little uncomfortable to sit on his lap and she shifted. Suddenly his arm clamped around her.

“Where are you going?” he asked roughly, pulling her back against him, tilting her back to kiss her. He tasted of bread and butter and rising anticipation, and she curled her hand around his neck, kissing him more deeply. A moment later they were standing up, Jack sliding the robe from her. Then he picked her up, carrying her to the edge of the bed.

“Grab hold,” he said, raising her hands to one of the bed’s four tall posts. She did, her back to him as he picked up her foot and slipped it into her pump. When he did the other, he spread her legs slightly, nudging them with his knee. “Now keep hold of the post and don’t let it go.”

She wondered what he was doing, what he was about to do. Not that it mattered. All he had to do was touch her and seconds later, she’d go off. But this was different; she couldn’t see him standing there with her breasts separated by the post, her back completely exposed, teetering there on her four-inch heels. She felt herself go very wet as she heard him fall to his knees.

“Beautiful ass,” he murmured, kissing it, sliding his hands over the taut flesh, kneading it until it felt hot. Then she heard him reach behind him for a moment and pour something in his hands, and when he stood that something was shockingly cool and smelling of cucumbers when it met the heated flesh of her breast. As he kissed her neck, his steel shaft of a cock pulsing against her back, he rubbed lotion up her arms, over her breasts, down her belly and up her back, Leslie slowly swaying against him as he

gathered up some more to slather down her back, down each leg, to the tops of her pumps and into the tiny cleavage of her toes. And when he was finished, when the only places where her cooled flesh still ran uncontrollably hot was her quivering ass and her steadily moistening pussy, he gathered up the biggest handful of cucumber lotion yet and once again falling to his knees, spread her legs once more, pressing the tiniest of kisses to one cheek.

“Bastard,” Leslie cursed him. “What are you doing to me?”

“Everything,” he whispered, his hands pressing into her heated skin.

He swirled it around her ass, over her hips, down into her thatch of pussy and, bringing his hands back, poured himself a bit more and slid it between her cheeks, his finger suddenly delving deep inside her. It was as if he touched some magic button and instantly Leslie went off, her whole body quivering in his hand, a low, throaty moan rising from her as she shook with such an intense orgasm she bucked against the post, nearly collapsing. He withdrew, she heard a rip and within seconds he drove his cock into her pussy, Jack crouching slightly to match her height. From there he grasped hold of her hips and it was a determined, methodical dance, rising swiftly until soon he was slamming her, fucking her with such force, his hand pressed against her belly and he was lifting her off the floor. Leslie arched to kiss him, her cries of pleasure raining down his throat. A moment more and he was coming, too. She could feel his cock pulsing inside her, his cries matching hers. When he was through, they collapsed to the bed.

He buried his head between her shoulder blades, kissing her. “Leslie, sweetheart, stay with me tonight.”

“Stay with you?” She glanced at the clock. It was nearly four thirty and the sun

had already set. And from what she could see from the window, the snow was steadily picking up. “But it’s snowing outside. If we wait any longer, we’d have to stay here.”

He raised up on his arm, sliding himself from her as he turned her over, and all at once he seemed overwhelmed, panic washing over his face. “Leslie...” he whispered, kissing her with such a desperation and ferocity she was fairly breathless by the time they broke apart. He held her tightly, nuzzling her neck. “Stay with me, please. Say yes.”

She closed her eyes, sighing; it was certainly hard to resist. The room was so cozy, the fire crackling, the bed like a cloud. And never had she felt so safe within someone’s arms. But he was a politician, a player, and no matter how good he made her feel inside and out, she just couldn’t let herself get involved with anyone like him again. Not if she ever expect to regain one iota of self respect.

Yet she was already here, neck-deep into what scared her the most. And if she could never have Jack Falco beyond what they’d share within these walls, then what could it hurt to spend the rest of the night with him? She pulled back, reaching up to touch his cheek. He turned and kissed it, grasping her hand in his.

“Leslie?” he said, kissing her fingers.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said, slanting him a glance. “See, I just started this job, and if I’m late tomorrow, it won’t look good for me. I’m a very prompt and efficient person. I don’t want to get in bad with the boss.”

He smiled wickedly. “How about I put a word in for you with the big guy? I know people. I have influence. I’ll convince him just how valuable you really are. Maybe I can even convince him to give you raise. A big, fat one.”

“Oh yeah?” She slung a leg over his hip, pushing back his robe to nudge her spike

heel against his ass. “Maybe he’ll want something back then. Maybe I’ll have to sleep with him to get a big one.”

“Hey, I’ll give you a big one right now.” He slid atop her, kissing her lazily, his hands cradling her head as suddenly he fell serious. “Come on, Leslie, stay with me. We’ll leave early and I’ll get you home by seven so you’ll still have time to change. And no one will know. Promise. Please stay with me. Spend the night in my arms.”

He could be so romantic, and that would be her downfall, because more than likely it was a *modus operandi* he used with all the girls, and he was treating her no differently than any of them.

But she *was* different, because she was as poisonous to him as he was to her. She looked deep into his lethal green eyes, now gone pleading, and instantly knew he had won. She was a sucker for almost anything Jack.

“Okay, I’ll stay.”

He kissed her. “Thank you.”

Almost.

Chapter Five

Jack's eyes snapped open, wide awake with the realization: *I'm falling in love with her.*

He slid his arm from around Leslie and she snuffled, rolling to lie on her belly, the blanket slipping just to the cleft of that beautiful bottom, her soft and steady breathing evidence that she had resumed whatever sleep he just interrupted. He eased himself upright, gathering the covers to her neck, the silky blond hair he had long dreamed about spilling over to his pillow. Just the fact that Leslie was in his bed was enough to make him hard, and he fought back the urge to sink himself into her. He smiled; as many times as he'd had her tonight, after her year of involuntary abstinence, he was lucky he hadn't killed her already.

He climbed out of bed, shoving his arms into his robe, and threw another log on the fire. It crackled and sparked and he dropped into the chair before it, watching the flames lick and sway, a perfect vehicle for contemplation. Because after such a realization, he certainly had a lot to ponder. And some definite choices to make.

Not that he ever had to make many before. His road ahead always seemed predestined, nearly a foregone conclusion. With the judicial bench on one side of the family and attorneys general and a senator on the other, it was only natural that John Colvin Falco Jr. would go into public service—as his father had, as his grandfathers had. Jack's political training began early, first at The Lawrenceville School, then just up the road to Princeton where he was president of his senior class, finishing up with Harvard Law and the Harvard Law Review. From there it was the district attorney's office in

Newark, then back to South Jersey to his home turf in Haddonfield as a law-and-order district attorney who fought for rehabilitation to fight recidivism. He became a state senator who actually saved the taxpayers money, and finally, at age thirty, won his first of six landslide Congressional elections, the many bills he sponsored not only returning more tax dollars back to his district, but also passing with bipartisan approval.

So it was because of this wide appeal, not to mention his telegenic good looks, that he was approached by the party movers and shakers to toss his hat in the ring for governor. With the second-term incumbent a Democrat as well, Falco seemed a natural choice, and one he had been setting his cap for all along. As a matter of fact, if he won, Jack had no intention of stopping there. Because everyone knew the fastest way to the White House was through the State House. And he was certain he'd been born to occupy it.

Jack picked up a poker, gave the log a push. It fell into a pile of embers, sparks shooting up the chimney. All the rooms at the Inn had gas fireplaces but this one, reserved for responsible—and *special*—guests. Guests who required a certain level of discretion and anonymity, as well as an innkeeper who could keep his mouth shut. Over the years The Crown and Fife Inn had welcomed more than a few of Jack's own *special* guests, as it gave him complete cover to indulge his one fantasy: that he could make love as often as he liked without the possibility of ever falling in love.

Then came Leslie.

He shouldn't have brought her here, and he knew it. She was nothing like the others, and it wasn't just because she was beautiful, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. From the moment he first lay eyes on her he knew he had to have her. And he

truly believed if he brought her here, if he made love to her, he would finally get her out of his system.

Instead, the opposite had happened. He discovered his attraction ran deeper, to a point where he almost believed they shared the same metaphysical vibe. But knowing that only rattled him more, because he knew he could never allow his desire for her to go beyond the physical. He closed his eyes and thought of her: a pocket goddess, tiny, but every feature molded to perfection, that gorgeous blond hair—natural, he now knew, her small but voluptuous figure, her eyes the color of sky, an intelligence that sparked every conversation from serious to sardonic. Which made him wonder again: why would a woman with her obvious talent and impressive job pedigree end up more or less subservient to such an inferior husband?

He was falling in love with her.

He slipped the poker back, dropping his head into his hands. It was insane, falling in love this quickly. He couldn't love her. He couldn't, *wouldn't* do it to her. Because a woman like Leslie deserved to have a partner—a real one. And he'd always told himself he would never marry, never subject someone he loved to the suffering he'd seen his family go through. He looked back to the bed, watched her back rising and falling in sleep, clenching his fist at what she had been through already. "Motherfucker," he cursed, thinking of Ted. He'd like to pummel him senseless.

Jack had asked for a brandy earlier, though he'd never gotten around to drinking it. He lifted it from where it sat on the table beside him and took a long sip, the fiery liquid warming his whole body the way down. In a little over two weeks, he'd be back in Washington, in the Georgetown townhouse that had its own very discreet back door,

much like the one his father had all those years back. The one Jack and his mother had used to surprise him the day they had come back from Paris, two days earlier than they had planned, a week before the start of his sophomore year in high school, a day before his father's birthday. His mother had used the back door to sneak in balloons, cake and champagne. It was late, near eleven o'clock at night, and she figured she'd surprise him as he watched the late news in bed. So they crept up the back steps, the glass flutes tinkling against each other as they inched up stairs lit only by birthday candles. His mother reached the bedroom only to drop the cake to the floor. The high-pitched scream of another woman soon followed.

Jack sipped the brandy, feeling more than a little dirty. He should've never brought Leslie here, and not because she had figured it out right away.

Because no man should ever bring Leslie through the back door.

"Jack...?"

He downed the rest of the brandy and rose from the chair, reaching the bed in two strides. He threw off the robe and climbed in with her. Leslie pushed up on her elbows, her hair tousled, her eyes thick with sleep, her body silhouetted by firelight. "I woke up and you were gone."

His heart clenched. "Sweetheart, I'm right here," he whispered, kissing her shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere."

She fell back to her belly, clutching her pillow under her. "Strange, the things you think of in the middle of the night. I thought you'd gone so you wouldn't be seen leaving with me in the morning." She yawned, pushing hair from her eyes. "I wouldn't blame you if you did. In fact, it's probably a good idea."

Just the thought of it made him angry. “Why would I do that? And what would it matter? I’m single and so are you.”

She looked at him pointedly. “No, Jack, I’m not.”

“A mere technicality.”

“No, a legal reality.” She arched up. “Ted may be in jail, but I’m still married to him. And his name still makes the evening news. You get caught with me, you might as well kiss your political career goodbye.”

He pulled her against him, taking her chin in his hand. “I’d much rather be kissing you.” Then he did, thoroughly and with a new intent. “I’ll never hide you, Leslie. Never.”

She pulled back. “Jack, you already are.”

“No.” He wouldn’t hear of it. He’d rather never see her again than let that happen. He kissed her neck, her back, the slope of her bottom. “Let’s not talk about that now, not here. We have to leave soon. Let’s not waste it.”

He pulled the covers back and she shivered—more from his touch and not the chill, he hoped. Because within the next few minutes he intended to make her very warm, kissing and nipping the perfect slopes of her perfect ass.

She turned to look at him. “Jack, don’t do anything else, just fuck me. Please. I want to feel you inside me.”

Just to hear her say that sent an electric charge straight to his groin. “Really? Are you sure? Because I love the way you taste.”

She squirmed against the sheet, pushing the pillow under her belly. “Please, Jack, come on.” She sounded a little breathless. “*Hurry.*”

He reached to the night table, slid a condom on and, spreading her legs, entered

her pussy from behind.

She groaned, writhing beneath him, going a little breathless himself. Each time he fucked her she felt more exquisite than the last. Leslie was already so wet it was as if she'd been waiting for him. He stroked her slowly and deeply, each movement sheer heaven and hell. Heaven because he was inside her, hell because he was terrified it'd be the last time. He pulled himself from her.

She started. "What are you doing? I was just about to—"

"And I'd like to see you when you do." When he nudged her and she turned over, he nearly lost it. There in the firelight, her face sleepily serene, her full breasts rising and falling in anticipation, her legs opening to receive him, she was simply the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

"Jack..." she murmured, pulling him to her.

They kissed and he slipped inside her, his heart swelling.

He raised himself over her, watching her face as he made love to her. He wondered what she was thinking, wondered if she felt the same way about him as he did about her, wondered if he felt as bone-rattlingly wonderful to her as she did to him. Her eyes opened and she looked lazily into his.

"What are you thinking?" she said.

He laughed, swiveling his hips. "As if I can think when I'm fucking you."

She shivered, squeaking. "I—I know what you mean." She snaked a hand between them, tweaking his balls. He flinched, his eyes widening in surprise. "*There's* something else to not think about."

He grabbed her. "Minx." Rolling over, he shifted Leslie to atop him. "There. Now

at least I can watch you,” he said, his hands clamping onto her hips.

“Don’t be so sure.” She lifted herself up and, turning around, straddled him backwards. “Try watching me now,” she said over her shoulder, giving his balls another tweak.

His fingers dug into her hips. “Oh, you are so in for it now.”

He raised up and slammed her, Leslie’s legs near lifting off the bed. She whirled her head around to gape at him, his eyes telegraphing, *Didn’t I warn you?* She turned back and slid forward, grabbing his knees as she slid up and down him in response. He latched hold of her ass, meeting her every advance and retreat with such exquisite force that within seconds he felt her muscles clamp around him and she was coming, her mouth opened, her neck arching back, her firelit hair spilling down her back.

“Turn around. Leslie, please, turn around,” he pleaded, and after a moment or two she did, her face flushed from pleasure. She leaned forward, one breast hovering just above his mouth. He latched onto one, sucking, his tongue circling and flicking a hard nipple as she groaned, her hands kneading his chest.

“Fuck me,” she moaned. “Please, Jack. I can’t stand it any longer.” She leaned forward, seizing his mouth with hers.

He’d heard something rather coarse years back in prep school, when having sex was still mostly a game of trick and conquest. When as far as their exploits were concerned, boys were still transitioning from sniggering, bragging adolescents to reticent gentlemen. He had heard the sexual act referred to *making the beast with two backs*. Rather vile, if you thought about it, but replace a word and it became almost poetic. Because now, when Jack raised up and clasped his arms around Leslie, when she molded

herself against him, with his cock deep inside her and their mouth sharing the same air, beasts aside, they became one. With their legs wrapped around each other, with his heart beating in time with hers, their rhythm fused and swelled, up and over and on and on.

“Leslie...” he said from within their embrace, “I don’t know if I can wait anymore.”

“Then don’t,” she said, kissing him. “Because...I can’t.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. Her eyes hooded like she was drugged, and all at once her head jerked back and she was coming and then, so was he. His hips tightened and it was like a bomb went off inside him, his whole body shaking with mind-numbing pleasure. When it was over, he slumped in her arms.

She kissed his forehead, his cheek, damp, like hers. “Jack...Jack...”

He couldn’t speak. He pulled her to him, wishing he could burrow inside her.

He was falling in love with her. Much more than he ever thought. Soon he wouldn’t have a choice, but for now? He was going to make every moment count.

* * * *

It was still dark when they pulled into the alleyway between Leslie’s building and a long garage. She turned to him, unsure of what to say.

So she told him. “I really don’t know what to say.”

He squeezed her hand. “How about, ‘Would you like to come up for a minute?’”

“I don’t think that’d be a good idea. As it is, I hardly have time to shower and change.”

He smiled wickedly. “I could help you.”

“You’ve helped me enough.” She grabbed her purse, her hand on the door,

laughing slightly. “All right. Maybe I *can* say something. I know this is going to be weird for both of us, but you don’t have to worry that I’ll tell anyone. Believe me, I don’t need the bad press any more than you do.” She took his hands in hers. “I’ll never forget last night, Jack. You’re a wonderful lover and you gave me a wonderful day, and that’s something I’ve needed for a long, long time. And thanks again for the great opportunity. Which I’d better not blow, if I haven’t already.”

“How could that be possible?”

“Let me put it this way.” She looked at him. “I didn’t come back yesterday.”

“You were with me. Mallory and Lee know that, and they’re the only people you have to worry about.” He grinned. “Besides me.”

“Oh, terrific.” She could feel herself blushing. “Like it’s not going to be embarrassing walking in there this morning.”

His hands tightened. “Leslie.” He looked down on their clasped hands, his brow furrowing in concentration. He seemed to be conflicted by something, and Leslie dearly hoped it had nothing to do with her. But that was ridiculous, as more than likely it was *all* about her. Because wasn’t she struggling, too? If she wasn’t, she would’ve jumped from the car the second it turned the corner.

He looked up suddenly. “I want to keep on seeing you. I don’t want to end it here, in an alleyway.”

“But that’s insane.” She wanted to throttle him. “That’s the only place it could ever be, don’t you realize? You’re running for *governor*, Jack! And I’m still married with a husband in jail. Can you imagine? The press would crucify you.”

“You act as if you’ve done something wrong.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s guilt by association.”

“You don’t think people know you’re a victim?”

She laughed. “I am so sick of playing the wronged political wife. It’s like a scarlet ‘P’ they press on your forehead. It’s not your fault, but you’re a pariah anyway.”

“That’s not true.”

“Look. I’m screwed no matter what I say or do. The only thing that’ll maybe save me is time and the next scandal.” She looked askance. “People have short memories when there’s fresh meat on the table.”

He kissed her fingers. “And what am supposed to do with my memory? Do you actually think I can forget you?”

“Jack, please. As special as I’d like to think I am—and truly, I’m not being sarcastic or bitter or vindictive when I say this—I’m sure there are plenty of other nice girls like me out there. Ones without husbands in jail, women you can actually take out in public. Matter of fact, just last week I saw one of them with you in the newspaper, on a page opposite an article on Ted’s hearing. A Rebecca something-or-other.”

His eyes darkened. “Right, I don’t remember her name, either.”

“And a little while later you’ll forget mine, too.” She kissed him quickly, withdrawing her hand. “Goodbye, Jack. I suppose I’ll be seeing you around headquarters now and then.”

“Sooner than you think. I’ll probably be there in an hour.”

“No, you won’t. You have a breakfast to go to down in Camden, and a luncheon in Vineland, and you’re supposed to attend some big benefit tonight in Atlantic City.”

He looked at her, amazed. “How do you know that?”

“I saw your schedule. And I have a very good memory.” She opened the door.
“Now really, goodbye.”

“No.” He tugged her to him and he kissed her, his hands cradling her face. Leslie felt her mind blank from the sheer sweetness of it, or maybe it was the desperation. Either way, she couldn’t help feeling that perhaps last night meant a bit more to Jack than she realized. Not that it was any more comforting.

She pulled away. “I have to go.” And she did, never looking back until she reached the second floor of her flat, where she ran straight to her bedroom window.

He waited a minute, then finally backed out the alleyway, turning his lights on only when he hit the still-dark streets.

“Another clean getaway,” she said, dropping the curtain to closed.

* * * *

The snow that made the Crown and Fife Inn so cozy hadn’t reached as south as Riverboro. Instead the precipitation hovered over the town in the form of a cold, persistent drizzle, chilling Leslie to the bone as walked the few blocks to Falco Headquarters. It was a little past seven thirty, and she wanted to get to the office early as was her intention the day before. She smiled inwardly, Not that she minded the way it was thwarted. Even so, her first day at the office promised to be weird enough. How much did Mallory and Lee know?

The answer came quite quickly: *Exactly what Jack had told them.*

She turned the corner, and there it was: still dark, still empty. She sighed in relief. Awkwardness postponed, at least for a little while. She unlocked the door and went in. Again, the alarm was off.

“Good morning, Mrs. Parks,” she heard someone say from the back. She peered through the shadows to the silhouette of a woman standing in an office doorway. *Mallory*. “Get settled, then come and see me, please.”

“Sure,” Leslie said, “right away.” She hurried to put her coat and purse down in her own office, noticing that someone had retrieved the bags she’d carried in and eventually dropped in a panic. She straightened her skirt and hair and left for Mallory’s office next door.

“Hi,” Leslie said, knocking on the molding just outside it.

A tall, slim woman about Leslie’s age rose from her desk, her shoulder-length blond hair arrow-straight, her business suit of the finest cut, her features classically pretty. She extended her hand, smiling graciously. “Mallory Leary,” she said, shaking Leslie’s hand. “Have a seat, Mrs. Parks.”

“Call me Leslie, please,” she said. She crossed her ankles and leveled her gaze with her new boss’s. “About yesterday morning...”

“Ah, yes, yesterday morning.” She arched a brow. “Quite the speech you wrote for our boy yesterday.”

Leslie stared at her. “You read it?”

“Of course,” she said briskly. “The Congressman sent it to me right after you gave it to him. You’ll quickly find out he doesn’t make a move without Lee or me knowing about it.” She leaned in. “And that means in everything, Mrs. Parks. *Everything*.”

Leslie cleared her throat, feeling the burn rising up her neck. “Sort of brings voyeurism to a new level, wouldn’t you agree? Well, in case you were wondering, Mrs. Leary” —she leaned in as well— “he likes the shoes on.”

Leslie pushed herself from the chair. “Just give me a minute, and I’ll be out of here.”

Mallory shot to her feet. “Oh Christ, wait.”

She stopped, turning from the door.

Mallory sighed heavily, her mouth crooking. “Okay, you proved you could be just as tough a bitch as me. So pour yourself a cup of coffee, sit the hell down and let’s get acquainted.” Her smile widened and warmed. “Leslie.”

Leslie gripped the molding. *Oh, what the hell?* “Okay.” She poured herself a cup of coffee from a little cart by the window, then returned to her chair, knowing none of this should’ve come as a surprise. She’d been around politics long enough, and full disclosure had to be even deeper for a man running for governor. And it wasn’t as if Lee hadn’t already warned her.

Mallory came around the desk to perch on it across from Leslie. “Look, the fact remains if you weren’t good, you wouldn’t be here, and Leslie—you’re one of the best there is. That was a hell of a speech yesterday. You goddamn nailed it.”

What else could she say besides, “Thank you.”

“Which leads me want to ask—why the hell would you take a position as office manager?”

“Got any openings for speechwriters?”

“Touché, but still. It makes me wonder why you don’t do it any longer. Matter of fact, Lee was just saying the other day, why would a woman with your qualifications end up running an office supply business?”

Leslie shifted in her seat; she did *not* want to go there.. “Let’s just say I got a bit

burned out.”

“Well, unburn yourself. You’re the Congressman’s new speechwriter.”

“No,” Leslie snapped. “I’d really be much happier as an office manager.”

Mallory stared at her for a moment. “Leslie, darling, I don’t care. You’ve been drafted. Of course, you’re still going to have to be my slave when I’m in town, but I think the fact we’ll be doubling your salary will make up for any inconvenience.”

“Mallory.” She took a deep breath. *Mallory...what?* She couldn’t give her the real reason why. She could hardly admit it to herself. The fact remained she hadn’t any choice, not really. And just the fact that it was political and not corporate had to make a difference. She set her coffee down, smoothing the folds of her skirt. “All right, then. You got me.”

Mallory patted her knee and went back behind her desk. “Good girl. I’m happy to have you on our team. Now, let me give you a quick rundown on myself. I’m thirty-eight, married for five years to a freelance journalist, and I have a son who’s eighteen months old. I’ve worked on three national campaigns, one senatorial, four congressional, and this is my third gubernatorial. I have a law degree from Yale, my first book’s coming out in March, and every now and then I sneak one of my husband’s cigars. I work out every morning, read five newspapers and twenty Web sites a day, and I like my salads wilted and my steaks rare. And I never—and this is important—like it when something happens in any campaign I’m working on that I don’t know about.” She leaned forward. “So why don’t we get rid of the other elephant in the room now, shall we?”

Leslie regarded her. “What’s to tell? Apparently you already know everything.”

“What I know is this. Leslie...” She softened considerably. “The man wants you.”

“And you know this because...?”

“Because most of them—no, *all* of them have been little more than arm candy. You are a light-years’ improvement. Also, you’re the first one he’s actually talked to me about. Leslie, this time it’s serious.”

Good God; she was in deeper than she ever thought possible. “But that’s ridiculous. I’ll assume you know I’m still married and who I’m married to.”

“Of course. Which, by hiring you, makes Jack look the white knight. As long as you don’t get involved—publicly, I’m saying.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look. I’m aware that every man has appetites, and the Congressman is no exception. In fact, exceptional men usually have exceptional appetites, and truly—I mean no disrespect to you by saying this—but wouldn’t it be better that he see you in private than him risking a liaison with someone less...respectable?”

“As if having a husband in jail is *de rigueur* in only the best circles.”

“As in him having a woman he cares nothing about.” She came around the desk again. “Leslie, I’ve never seen him react to any woman like you, and I’ve known Jack a long time. He and my husband went to college together. In popular parlance, the man’s into you.”

“But I don’t want a serious relationship with anyone now.”

“Which is why it’s perfect. You keep our boy occupied so he doesn’t stray into scandal territory, and get to make enough money to put yourself back on track. In the meantime, have a hot hunk of a man to play with until Election Day. Come on, Les! It’s a sweet deal. And hasn’t it been something men have been doing to us for centuries now?”

Time to get our own backs. And have some fun in the process. What do you say?"

"To what?" Jack called, walking in out of the shadows.

Chapter Six

Leslie swiveled around. “Jack! What are you—”

Suddenly he kissed her, planting one thoroughly possessive smooch against her stunned and gaping mouth. “Hello, sweetheart,” Jack said. “Let me tell you again how lovely you look today.” He straightened. “And a good morning to you, Mallory.”

Mallory arched a brow, leaning up on her arm as he went for the coffee. “Just how good of a morning is it, Jack?”

He poured, stirred, and took a sip before smiling over the rim of his cup. “Exceptional.”

“Oh, please!” Leslie cried. “I’m in this room, too. And I’ve certainly got a pulse.”

“Which I’m sure is quite elevated,” opined Mallory. “Okay, Jack. You’ve proven your point. Now what are we going to do about it?”

He eyed her blithely, tossing her a folded sheaf of papers from his pocket. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. I’m only here to bring you my notes like you asked.”

“You could have e-mailed them to me,” Mallory said, shuffling them.

“Now, what fun is that?” He took two more quick sips and set the cup down. “I’m off to Camden. Lee’s bringing the car around. We’ll have a quick meeting later after lunch. And you.” He looked to Leslie. “It’s formal, so wear something devastating.”

“What’s formal? What are you talking about?” She sprang to her feet, standing to block him but Jack squeezed past her anyway. “Jack! *Jack!*”

“Fill her in, Mal!” he called, sprinting out the doorway and into Lee’s waiting car.

“Damn!” Leslie spun around to Mallory. “Would you mind telling me what the hell that was all about?”

“There’ll be plenty of time to deal with *that* later. For now, *this*....” She tossed the sheaf forward. “Is much more imminent.”

Realization lit Leslie’s face. “He wants me to write another speech.”

“My, my,” Mallory said, leaning back to cross her legs, “you’re as sharp as the proverbial tack. This one’s for the New Jersey Ecological Forum Benefit in A.C. He’s due to give a speech on the pros and cons of beach replenishment. It’s a tricky subject, so our boy has to be neither for nor against it.”

Leslie stared at her. “You’re joking, right?”

“Make it about twenty minutes or so. Long enough to give him face time, but not so long paralysis sets in.” She squinted. “By the way, do you happen to have a green gown?”

“No.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“It’s a thing they do every year. The women wear green gowns, the men green ties and cummerbunds. Which means, of course, the men always get away cheaper.” She reached in a drawer and pulled out a business card, signing her name to the back. She handed it to Leslie. “Go to Etienne’s down on High Street. Ask for Bree. Give her this card and she’ll invoice us.” She checked her watch. “Well, best get, cracking, Les. I have a million stops to make before I can meet Jack in Vineland. The car will pick you up at six thirty.”

“Mallory,” Leslie said evenly, “aren’t you leaving out a few things? Will you please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Why, it’s rather simple, dear.” She threw her coat over her shoulders and grabbed her purse. “A,” she ticked off her fingers, “you’re writing a crowd-pleasingly ambiguous speech for Jack. B, you’re buying a very environmentally green gown, and C, you’re taking the speech and your elegantly coutured yet socially-conscious self down to Atlantic City where you’ll meet Lee so he can go over said fabulous speech before our boy delivers it. And after he does?” She breezed past her. “You get to jump his bones.”

“Why am I starting to feel like a well-paid whore?” Leslie called after her.

Mallory stopped, turning. “Then quit.”

“Oh, right. Just like that.”

“Why not?” She came closer. “I’ll tell you why not. Because you can’t. Because he’s gotten under your skin. Because although you’d never admit it, you want him as much as he wants you. Maybe more. Isn’t that the truth?”

Leslie sighed, leaning into the jamb of the door. “Which is the last thing I need right now in my life.”

“Oh, but you’re wrong. This is *exactly* what you need. A chance to use your brain and your body in the best possible way they could be used. Unless, of course, you’re in love with him.”

“No,” she said quickly. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Of course it is.” Mallory smiled, taking Leslie’s arm to walk the big, empty room. “Listen to me, Les. Believe me when I say no one is forcing anything on you. From the moment Jack brought up the idea, you could’ve said no. But you didn’t. Matter of fact, you’ve said *yes* to everything we’ve asked of you.” She paused. “Let me ask you this: do you even like Jack?”

She laughed. "I think the answer's obvious."

"Can you use the money we're paying you?"

"Even more obvious."

"Then why are we even having this conversation?" They stopped at the door, Mallory turning as she reached for the knob. "Look, I don't know what happened that got you away from your high-powered career, and it's none of my business so I won't ask. But if doing this helps you re-establish it and puts you back on your feet, then won't it be worth it? Honestly, we're all here to do the same thing—to get Jack to the State House in Trenton. As long as we're not breaking any laws, we get to do it anyway we can. And you're free to walk out any time you're ready." She held out her hand. "Deal?"

There was a hesitation wide enough to drive a truck through, but in the end, Leslie shook it. "I have a feeling I'm going to regret this."

"The only regret you'll have is if you don't." Mallory swept out there door. "Now get back in there and go write one fabulous speech."

"As if there were any other kind," Leslie said, her voice echoing throughout the big empty room.

* * * *

Green, like his eyes.

That was the first thing Leslie thought when she saw the forest-hued gown, sleeveless with a deep drape in front, accentuating, for his viewing pleasure, one of her finest attributes. She had already e-mailed the speech to Lee that afternoon, though he made it plain he would likely have changes by the time she made it down. She shifted toward the window, the electric-lit skyline of Atlantic City coming into view. Her

stomach jumped a bit. It had only been a little more than twelve hours since she last saw Jack, but somehow it felt like days.

She was crazy and she knew it. It couldn't possibly go anywhere, and each time she saw him, the risk increased that they'd get caught. But she also knew she couldn't help herself. Twelve hours and two showers later she could still smell him on her skin; half a day passing and she was still breathless from the memory of his touch. As they bumped off the bridge and the neon blaze of Atlantic City hit her square in the senses, Leslie only had one thing on her mind: how quickly she could find him so she could feel that way again.

The car cut through the cross streets to an employees' entrance at the side of a Boardwalk hotel-casino. When the driver opened her door, Lee met her on the other side.

"Well, hello gorgeous..." he said, reaching for her hand. He was dressed in a tuxedo, the sharp cut of his formal wear matching the incisive lilt to his mouth. He adjusted his black-framed glasses and tucked Leslie's arm in his, eyeing her up and down. "Holy shamoly—I wanted you to give our boy a good speech, not a coronary."

Leslie slanted him a glance. "It was the only green gown I could find."

"Well, it looks like it was made for you, precious. Anyway, the speech is killer, but I'm still having a problem with how you say Sea Bright will need to deconstruct..."

They discussed their options along the way to a small office in the hotel's business center, where Leslie worked out the few changes and within fifteen minutes they were printing. "When is he supposed to go on?" she asked.

"Any minute," Lee said, checking his BlackBerry. "He just text-messed me he's in the wings, waiting for you now."

“In the wings!” Leslie scrambled to her feet. “How could you cut it so close?”

“Relax,” he said, handing her the speech, still hot from the printer. “The chap who is on now is a real gasbag, and we still have a few minutes. Besides, Jack’s a stickler for getting it right. We only got a hold of the new EPA guidelines right before you arrived.”

“Still.” She made toward the door. “Tell me where to go.”

His phone rang. “Down the hall to the end, then make a right, first door on your left.” He clamped the phone to his ear, adding, “I’ll meet you in the lobby of the Marina Ballroom in ten minutes.”

“Right.” She shoved the speech in her purse and shot down the hall.

When she found Jack he was standing with his back to her, intent on the man on the stage. “*Jack!*” she called, *sotto voce*, and he turned, his eyes lighting the dim space.

“Leslie...” he breathed, going to her.

Without preamble he pulled her in his arms. “You look wonderful. Where the hell did you get that gown?” He kissed her possessively, whispering in her ear, “Jesus, I’ve missed you.”

She kissed his neck, nearly overwhelmed. “I missed you, too,” she said, her arms tightening around him. Suddenly, she couldn’t help herself; he was just too solid, too magnetic, too—*Jack*. She pulled his head down to hers and kissed him with everything in her.

He groaned. “Leslie, Leslie...” All at once he was lifting her, her gown bunching up to her waist as she wrapped her legs around him. Before she could think, he had them snaking through a maze of curtain and suddenly her back hit a wall and she was yanking his zipper down.

“Christ...I even want you now,” he groaned against her mouth.

“Then have me,” she whispered, taking his cock in her hand, shoving her panties aside. A second later her breath caught from the impact.

His eyes were hooded, luminescent. “We only have a minute.”

“I don’t care,” she said, pushing into him. “They’ll wait. *Fuck me.*”

He took a deep breath and, bracing his hand against the wall, did, with so much force Leslie thought she’d implode with each thrust. She wanted to scream, toss her head back, wail, but instead she clutched his jacket between her fingers and just squeezed, every iota of the pleasure he was giving her flowing through her fingers back to him. As her orgasm gripped her, as her neck arched to the side and he kissed her throat, she could feel him ready to lose control.

“Come in me, Jack. I want you to.”

She could feel him stiffen. “Leslie, I-I—”

“I have my diaphragm in,” she managed to choke out. “And Jack...” She kissed him. “I trust you.”

He stared at her, his face frozen, his eyes caught. Then all of a sudden his hands clamped around her bottom and he was shaking, Leslie feeling him letting loose inside her. When finally he was through, he held her against him, his heart beating wildly.

“You’re wonderful,” he whispered, pulling her tighter against him. “I don’t want to let you go.”

“You’d better because it’d be pretty weird giving a speech like this. Not to mention I’m probably breaking your arms.”

She could feel his whole body relax as he kissed her hair. “You weigh practically

nothing.”

She laughed. “I think it’s more that you’re just a big, strong manly-man. I could lose a few pounds.”

He tweaked her bottom and she squeaked. “You do that, and I’ll force-feed you hot fudge sundaes. I like you just the way you are.”

“And I love hot fudge sundaes. It just might be worth the risk.”

His mouth crooked. “It just might.” He pulled himself from her and lowered her to the floor. Leslie straightened his tie as he zipped up.

“Oh my God, wait,” she said, reaching into her purse. “It might be worth an extra vote or two in some circles, but I still think my lipstick looks better on me. Bend down.” He did and she swiped the evidence from his lips. She shoved the tissues back in her purse, raking her fingers through his hair. “There. You’re dead-on Washington again.”

He buttoned his jacket, looking down on her. “And you look thoroughly tossed.” He leaned into her. “It’s almost making me hard again.”

A twinge of pleasure shot through her, and she pressed a hand to his chest. “Let’s hope not, as it’d be rather awkward for where you’re going.” From the stage they heard the sound of applause. “Time to dazzle them, Congressman.”

He cupped his hand under her chin. “Like you’ve already dazzled me.” He kissed her quickly then held out his palm. “Speech?”

With those green eyes on her, she had to push through some mental fog before she could react. “Speech—right!” She dug in her purse, producing it. “Lee and I just inserted some changes from what you saw this afternoon, but the only real thing that’s different is the part about—”

“I’m sure it’s perfect,” he said, smoothing a hand down the front of his jacket, thoroughly amazing Leslie. One more rake through his thick black hair, and he looked as crisp and relaxed as five minutes ago. As a matter of fact, even more.

Sex so becomes him, she marveled.

“I’ll be sitting at a table out front, so I’ll see you afterwards,” he said, checking beyond the wing curtains before he stepped out.

She heard footsteps approaching. “I have to meet Lee. Knock them dead!” By the time she slipped out the back door and into a bathroom across the hall, she could already hear them announcing him. She set her purse to the sink and faced the mirror.

Tossed, indeed.

Her lipstick was gone, her eyeliner was smudged, her skin was pink, her gown was askew. And—she felt a burn rush through her—there was a certain residual moistness between her legs that was certainly now giving her pause.

I trust you.

Did she? Did she really? Player that he was, it was too late to ponder the possible consequences. She stepped into a stall, swiped away what she could, stepped out and washed her hands and face, reapplied her makeup, straightened her gown, reinserted a comb. He always seemed to revel in her hair, but he hadn’t touched it. It remained nearly perfect. Odd, but that showed foresight. She tucked a stray hair back into her upsweep. Because this style would be pretty hard to fix with what she had in her purse. But wasn’t Jack all about foresight anyway?

Except when it came to her. There, he didn’t seem to have any at all. Unless he was living only in the present, where he’d have to be because any future together was

certainly ridiculous. She looped her purse over her arm and headed out the door.

She found Lee in the ballroom lobby chatting to a large man in a too-small tux. When Lee saw her he flashed her a dazzling smile. He reminded Leslie of a greyhound crossed with the Cheshire Cat, with a little bit of ferret tossed in. All sleek and sly and grin, a creature she'd most definitely want on her side. He shook the man's hand, then he was off to Leslie, stopping before her.

"Shall we go in?" he said, offering her arm. "I'm simply dying for some of that assembly-line salmon steak."

She took it. "And don't forget the mesclun salad that's been sitting uncovered in the refrigerator for a couple of days."

His eyes widened. "Oh...you've been to these things before, haven't you?"

"A few times."

"And they only get better, don't they?"

They entered the ballroom, the lights lowered a bit to contrast the stage where Jack stood at the podium. Lee stopped. "He looks good up there, doesn't he?"

He looks fabulous, Leslie couldn't help but think, her heart twisting a bit. "Yes. He does."

"And you're certainly good at damage control. Could hardly suspect either one of you." He leaned in. "At least to the untrained eye."

Leslie stared at him, shocked. "I see you've been to these things before yourself."

He winked. "Darling, you're looking at the master." He tugged her on. "Let's go. I'm absolutely *starving*."

* * * *

It was certainly true Leslie had been to a banquet or two before. In fact, they were nearly the mainstay of her social life with Ted. But she could never get used to them. No matter how good the people or the food or what was being shilled—no matter what, something was always being sold—she could never get past the boredom, her eye always on the exit. Yet this time was different. Instead of looking for the way out, she was continually looking to Jack. She was lucky she hadn't burned a hole in his back of his head.

"You're lucky you haven't burned a hole in his back of his head," Lee observed, draping his arm over her chair.

Leslie glared at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Right. I'm speaking Chinese. Relax. He isn't going anywhere."

"Obviously. He's the center of attention."

"He always is." Lee downed the last of his sherry. "Just look at him. Like meat to maggots."

"Not a very nice analogy."

"You got a better name for those sycophants?"

"Um..." Leslie tried for tact. "Voters?"

He waved dismissively. "Apples to oranges. But you're right. And I'm just tired. Let's go to bed."

"Nice try, but pass."

"Ha! Gotcha!" He stood up. "But seriously, folks, we have a suite upstairs. Jack's going to meet you there, and I've already got someone waiting. Sorry. I know you're probably devastated."

She rose to meet him. "I'm sure I'll recover."

He frowned, hand over heart. "Now who's devastated? Come on."

They took a private elevator that opened directly into a short hall of four suites. Lee swiped a key card and they entered into sumptuous living room with a wide ocean view, bedrooms on either end. A sleek-looking woman was perched on a barstool, a pitcherful of martinis at her elbow.

"*Ciao!*" she called, adding something else in Italian.

"Your tax dollars at work," Leslie said.

"Wrong," Lee snapped. "It's all mine." He peered at her over the rim of his glasses. "I'm very rich, you know."

"Aren't you lucky?"

He grinned. "Oh, yes." He went to the woman, kissing her quickly before reaching for a martini. "Aida, this is Leslie, Jack's..." He took a sip, thinking. "Jack's..." He shrugged. "*Jack's*. Oh well, she can't understand a word I'm saying anyway." He tugged the woman to her feet, looping her arm over his shoulder. "Grab the pitcher, darling—the pitcher! Yeah, that's it." Then looked to Leslie. "We're going to make violent and repetitive love now. See you in the morning." He left.

Leaving Leslie wondering what she was supposed to do next. She looked around her: vaulted ceiling, cushy sofas curled into conversation pits, a baby grand in the corner with a huge poinsettia on it, a wall of overflowing bookcases, a kitchen off to the side, expensive cabinetry supporting what looked like priceless china and sculpture, original artwork dotting the walls.

So this was how the idle rich lived. And this was only Lee's Atlantic City condo.

She couldn't imagine what his real home looked like. She wandered toward the other bedroom. Sumptuous as well. A large king dominated the room, fluffy pillows strewn across it, the space filled with fresh flowers. A window gave her a view of the Boardwalk, a raised Jacuzzi in the corner, a bathroom off to the side housing a double walk-in shower, the sink lined with crystal bottles and glass containers holding various oils and infusions. She stepped into the large closet, running her hand down one of two plush robes. The whole place oozed sensuality. She set her purse on the night table and leaned back on the bed, her body sinking into the downy softness of it. It was almost *too* cushy. She closed her eyes, giving into it, more tired than she realized.

She wasn't sure when, but sometime later she half heard the outer door open and close. Footsteps quickly followed, right up to her bedside. Almost immediately she caught his scent. "Jack?"

"Right. It's me." He gripped her shoulders. "Sweetheart, get up."

She arched her back into the mattress, reaching for him. "No...you come here. I'm too comfortable, and it's too late—"

Suddenly, she was upright, and Jack was pulling her to her feet. "No kidding, Leslie, get up. We have to get out of here."

Her eyes popped open. "Jack? What's wrong?"

But he was already tugging her toward the door, her purse in his hand. "Here," he said, draping it over her arm. "Now be very quiet and follow me."

In a moment they were in the small hallway outside the condo door, the elevator in front of them. Leslie pressed the button down.

"No," Jack said, steering her toward the stairway. "Lee told me another way out."

Let's go."

He took her hand and pulled her into the stairwell, their footsteps echoing against the bare, concrete walls. "Why are we taking the stairs, Jack? What's happened?"

"Remember that reporter I told you about yesterday? The one who was dogging me? Well, he's here, and he's asking too many questions."

They rounded another floor. "What kind of questions?"

"Ones that are none of his business. Now hurry."

They had gone down five floors by the time they reached a door that said *Service: Do Not Enter*. Jack tugged on it and they entered another hall, this one covered in well-worn vinyl. He hurried them to the other end to an elevator bank, pushing the button down. They entered a freight elevator, Jack yanking the cage doors closed.

"Just a couple more minutes and we'll be outside," he said. "I have someone bringing the car around."

When they hit bottom they exited directly into the frosty air, a sleek Mercedes waiting for them, already running. An attendant hopped out of the car.

"Pretty un-American of you," Leslie said, stepping into it.

Jack handed the attendant a folded bill, then slammed the door shut. "It's Lee's," he said, smiling for the first time since he arrived. "And he's a heartless capitalist." He shoved the car into gear and raced toward the boulevard.

They didn't say anything for the next few minutes, Jack concentrating on driving and Leslie concentrating on him. He was really quite good, she observed, snaking the car out of the city and onto the Expressway, his hands and feet working the clutch and gears as if he had been trained in LeMans. By the time the traffic thinned and he slowed down,

Leslie felt it safe to ask where they were going.

“Someplace where no one will hound us,” he said.

She felt a little panic rising within her. “And where’s that supposed to be?”

He looked to her, his eyes nearly blazing in the moonlight. “You said you trusted me. Is that still true?”

She considered that. Did she? *Yes*. “Yes.”

He looked back to the road. “That’s all I need to know.” He drove a few more miles, then turned off the Expressway. The road was unlit and nearly swallowed by forest, every star afire in the clear winter sky.

“I’m taking you home,” he said. “*My* home.”

Chapter Seven

Jack reached over to Leslie's slumbering head and idly pulled a comb from her hair. A lock like spun gold unfurled and settled against her shoulder. He looked back to the road as something deep within him clenched. He was the biggest bastard on the face of the Earth.

I trust you.

His first impulse was to scream, *don't!* But with the thought of being buried deep inside her, the exquisite feel of her enough to drain every ounce of sense from him, how could he possibly warn her trusting him was the most dangerous thing she could do? Because the fact she was next to him in this car proved he was selfishness incarnate, not to mention borderline insane. He brushed his fingers over the top of her silky head. The woman was political dynamite, yet he couldn't give her up.

Abruptly, the trees changed from scrubby to leafy as they came out of the Pine Barrens, the huge tract of National Reserve forest that dominated most of South Jersey, and Jack knew they weren't far now, farms and farmland on either side of them. He yanked the end of his bow tie and it unraveled, opening a few top buttons of his shirt so he could finally breathe again. He gripped the steering wheel in anticipation. It was always easier to breathe where he was going; it'd been way too long since he'd been there. One thing or the other always snagged his attention, not to mention running for this election.

Running. Funny how they used that term to describe it, but wasn't it deadly accurate? That's what he figured he'd been doing his whole life anyway: running from,

running to.

He turned off Route 206 as Arney's Mount came into view, the tower atop it blinking a steady *red, red, red*. Such an anomaly, this sudden glacial upthrust surrounded by flatland. Yet all his life it grounded him, a beacon of normalcy in an otherwise haphazard world. One more turn at the tiny town center and he was just a couple of miles away, the farms larger and further apart here. He passed a field spiky with remains of the fall's straw crop, where he turned up the long dirt road. At the end lay what his mother always euphemistically referred to as The Big House, and he saw its gables first as it slowly came into view. Good thing he had called ahead. He was glad the house would be warm for Leslie. Whether or not it was a mistake bringing her here, he still wanted it to be as much a haven for her as it always had been for him.

He pulled the car in front and shut it off. She was still asleep, dead to the world yet so very much alive. He curled his arm over the rim of her seat and just watched her, her chest rising and falling, her soft breathing like music. At that moment he was never more in love, and never more confused. She was as good for him as she was as bad. He wanted her, but he knew he couldn't keep her. He should leave her alone, but he couldn't let her go.

I trust you.

He knew it was the craziest thing she could do, yet it wasn't. Because at that very moment, as this woman felt safe enough to lose her consciousness to his care, he never felt more conflicted. She truly believed he would never hurt her, and he honestly believed he never could. But there still was the very real possibility he would anyway. That alone should have made him turn the car around and take her straight home. And leave her

alone for good.

But he was a selfish bastard. If he could only have a few more days, a few more hours, then maybe the rest without her wouldn't be so bad. Or at the very least, he'd have a real long time to convince himself it wasn't.

"Leslie," he said, brushing his finger across her cheek. "Wake up." She stirred and again, his heart clenched. "Wake up, sweetheart, we're here."

* * * *

Leslie jolted awake at the tickle to her cheek, her neck crooked and aching. She opened her eyes to darkness. *Where the hell am I?*

"Wake up, sweetheart, we're here."

She bolted upright, blinking. *Jack. Atlantic City. Lee's got one hot car.* And they were still in it. At—Jack's? She blinked again, focusing in on the light ahead, shining from a window. "This is your house?"

"Yes," he said, his fingers kneading the back of her neck.

Leslie sighed, the creak in her neck easing. "I thought you lived in Haddonfield."

"I do. This farm belonged to my mother's family. She left it to me."

Suddenly the porch light went on and a woman stepped out the front door. "Oh no, I think we just woke someone up," Leslie said.

Jack unsnapped his seat belt. "I already did that an hour and a half ago. Come on."

Leslie hadn't realized what a sanctuary Lee's hot car had been until she stepped outside it. Her gown and short jacket were no match for the sub-freezing night. A stiff breeze blowing off the adjacent field was enough to send her skittering after Jack. He was

already in the house when she caught up to him, his hand reaching for hers to pull her inside.

“Leslie, this is Selma,” he said, introducing her to the slim Latina woman. “She and her husband, Diego, take care of this place for me.”

“Welcome,” Selma said, smiling warmly. “The Congressman told me you might need something to change into. I left some of my things in the kitchen.”

“That’s unbelievably kind of you,” Leslie said, taken aback. “Thank you very much.”

“And she also left us a bit of late dinner,” Jack said. “Selma, I may be forced to increase your salary because of that. I’m starving.”

She laughed. “And I may be forced to accept. Good night, then.”

He looked to Leslie. “I’ll be right back. Make yourself at home.” He walked Selma out the door.

Leslie shrugged out of her jacket, folding it over her arms. There was no need for it, as the inside was already toasty courtesy of a roaring fireplace. She looked around the large room, gingerly stepping into it. One side was nearly all windows looking out onto the darkened fields, a winding staircase on the other, a large carpet in the center atop the polished, planked floors, Colonial-style furniture in groups all around it. With the walls an eclectic mix of original art and quilting, the air redolent of home cooking, the mantel and sconces already festooned with holiday greenery, Jack’s house looked inviting and cozy and very much like a home. Yet as she traced her hand over a squeakily dust-free end table, she suspected there was also something missing.

The door whooshed opened and Jack rushed in, stamping his feet. “I’d bet the

election that by morning there's snow on the ground."

"Ooh, dangerous call," Leslie said, joining him. "I'd never bet on the weather. Too risky."

He tossed off his coat to a hook by the door, slipping Leslie's from her to hang it beside his. "Maybe, but you're forgetting one thing. I never lose." He draped his arm over her shoulder. "Now let's go see what Selma left us."

They passed a big dining room along the way, dominated by a long table with ladderback chairs, enough to seat at least a dozen. One wall held three shelves of soup tureens which were most definitely antique, a huge cherrywood hutch and sideboard along the others, and another wall with another window to the darkened sky. Off to her right was a smaller, no doubt brighter, breakfast room, a table and chairs tucked into what looked to be a sunny alcove with a TV set into the wall, a laptop on a desk in the corner. Leslie took it all in like a museum tour.

"You have a lovely house," she said, stopping to examine an old photograph portrait above a dry sink.

"My great-grandmother," he said. "The daughter of a congressman. She was the township's first female mayor."

"Wow." She regarded the regal-looking woman. "Your political roots run deep."

He laughed softly. "Like magma. But then again, they'll stop with me."

That surprised her. "Planning on keeping your own issue out of the family business?"

His eyes turned a thick green. "I don't plan on having any issue." His BlackBerry rang. "Lee," he said, glancing at it. He clamped it to his ear. "Yeah, I stole your car. So

sue me. I left you my keys. We'll swap when..."

Leslie turned away, mildly stunned, pushing open the kitchen door. The room looked warm and inviting, a checker-clothed table in the center, another fireplace, old-fashioned glass-fronted cabinets contrasting very modern-looking appliances. She went to the sink, gripping its edges as she caught her own reflection in the window above it.

He doesn't want any children. Well, so? Why should that bother her? She clenched her teeth. How idiotic. She shouldn't even be here, let alone know something as intimate as his own procreation plans. She was his speechwriter, his employee. Her neck burned. And his lover. *No*. She'd go one better. He was *her* lover. She needed to keep that in perspective. She needed to remember what *she* was getting out of this arrangement, just like Mallory said, and not the other way around. Because after she got what she needed, she'd be gone.

"There you are."

He appeared in the reflection from behind her, his hands warm on her bare arms. He bent to her neck, kissing it. "Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?"

No sense him knowing how he had thrown her. She smiled, sliding her hand over his. "If you did, I didn't hear you. Tell me again."

"You look beautiful, gorgeous..." He kissed a trail down her neck. "Indescribably sexy..."

She shivered, turning in his arms, sliding her hands around his waist. "Not to mention you're looking very *GQ* yourself in that tux tonight."

"Ah, it's nothing but a uniform to me. Now this..." He slid the strap from her shoulder, baring it. "I can't wait to see what it looks like on the floor."

She eased away. "But first, we eat. You're starving, remember?"

He slung his jacket over a chair, his mouth crooking. "It's a damn good thing I am or you wouldn't stand a chance. Now sit."

Leslie did as Jack pulled a whole chicken from the oven, biscuits wrapped in foil beside them. From the refrigerator he brought a glass of celery and carrot sticks and a jar of olives, from under the sink, a jug of Chianti. After he set everything on the table they ate with a relish that surprised them both.

"Funny how a good adrenaline spike gives you such an appetite," Leslie said, nipping into a chicken leg.

He brought her hand to his mouth, taking a bite of the leg. "You make my adrenaline spike."

She tried to pull her arm back, but only succeeded in getting pulled into his lap. "If you think this'll get you any closer to stealing this leg, you're sadly mistaken." She turned away, taking a huge bite. "You had the other one."

He huffed, reaching past her to rip off a piece of breast. "Heartless wench."

After a few more chews, she said, "So how angry was Lee?"

He waved her off. "The car show's at the Convention Center, and Lee's neck-deep in a Fiat model. I don't think we have to worry about him until Monday." He tapped her nose. "So that means we have the whole weekend."

Mighty presumptuous of him. "I'm here for the whole weekend?"

His eyes hooded. "Even if I have to lock you in the basement."

She tossed the chicken bone to her plate. There was nowhere else she'd rather be. But how would she ever get this man out of her system if she couldn't stay out of his

bed? “I guess I’m being kidnapped then.”

He grinned, ripping into a chicken thigh. “You bet you are. Try to escape and I promise you’ll be punished.”

Her own thighs tingled. “Well, it’s too late to send me to bed without dinner.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to send you to bed.”

She yawned, shifting atop his lap. “Second thought, I *am* kind of tired.”

He dropped the thigh, swiping his hands with a napkin. “Who says you’ll be sleeping?”

“What else do you do in a bed?” she said, tracing her fingernail down his cheek.

He shivered and seizing her by the waist, lowered her back against the table. “Who the hell needs a bed?”

He kissed her, devouring her now, her lips, her neck, the rise of her breasts. Leslie writhed beneath him as his hand slid her gown to her thighs. She fumbled with his belt, unbuckling it, and his erection swelled beneath his fly as she found the zipper and eased it down. In the instant it took to grasp his steely cock she became so wet, she groaned, aching for Jack to sink himself into her. But instead his hand glided across her hip and into the thatch of her pussy, a little gasp of surprise reaching her as he nipped her earlobe. Obviously he had discovered her panties missing. Leslie had shoved them into her purse after their tryst in the wings.

“They did seem kind of superfluous,” she whispered.

“And you know me...” He laced his tongue in her ear, sending her bucking against him. “I’m all for cutting waste.”

“Then explain to me the need for these,” she said, her hands sliding to his back,

her fingers diving underneath his trousers to slip them over the smooth mounds of his ass.

He arched up and she lost her reach. “Patience, sweetheart...” he growled, tweaking her clit as he slid off of her. “We do have the whole weekend, remember?”

“And it’s seeming like it’ll take until Monday to—*ooh!*”

He had fallen to table-level and suddenly she felt something cool and insistent stroking and licking something hot and wet and so very ready. He had spread her legs and slid her gown to her waist, his hands clamped onto her hips as his tongue explored every inch of her pussy. Leslie moaned softly, feeling her body rising, her clit throbbing with each exquisite pass, her head buzzing with the heady expectation of impending release. It wouldn’t take much; it never did. There was something about Jack—in the way his eyes simmered; within the rich thrill of his voice; how he moved with effortless, masculine grace—that set him far and above any man she had ever encountered. Combine all those with a matchless intelligence and charisma, *then* funnel it all in her direction—

Her chest rose and fell, her heart pounding as he splayed his hand across her belly and slipped one finger inside her, and out and in and out and in—she gasped, her neck arching, her hips rising off the table as the pleasure took her again and again and again.

“Jack...” she groaned, her fingers digging into his hair. “Come here, Jack, please.”

In an instant he was atop her, his mouth covering hers, their tastes mingling as Leslie scissored her legs around his waist. She wanted him in her so badly she ground herself against him, Jack fumbling with his trousers and Leslie pushing his shorts away to free his cock, pulsing and turgid against her belly.

“Leslie...” he breathed, his heart pounding so closely against hers she could feel their cadence matching. “Hold on a minute, I think I have—”

“Don’t worry, I’m still ready for you,” she said, sliding her thumb across the slick head of his cock. She pulled herself back, ready to impale herself. “I came ready.” She wrapped her hand around him, guiding it into her as all at once—

“*No.*” Jack slid back, bracing himself over her. “Don’t.”

Leslie lifted her head. “Don’t? Don’t *what*?”

He looked slightly disoriented, pushing himself from the table. “We can’t do this.”

She almost laughed. “It’s a little late to get moralistic, don’t you think?”

“That’s not what I mean.” He straightened, pulling up his trousers. “I’m talking about what happened behind the stage before. Leslie, it was wonderful. But as wonderful as it was, it was a mistake.”

She stared at him. “Do you have some kind of a disease?”

“*No,*” he said quickly. “I always use protection, and besides, I was just tested a few weeks ago. I haven’t had sex since.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

He turned away, thrusting his hand into his hair. “Without a condom, it’s just too risky. We can’t do it like that again.”

“We don’t have to do it at all.” Leslie righted her gown and hopped off the table, grabbing his arm to turn him around. “Look, I get it, but all you had to do was ask me. If you did, I’d tell you it’s only been Ted for a very long time, and believe me, he was no player. So if you think I’m some kind of Typhoid Mary—”

“Please, I don’t think that.” He looked at her directly. “It’s just that I always wear a condom. When I do I know the onus is on me and there won’t be any...” He shrugged.

“Well, *accidents*.”

For a moment she thought she misunderstood him. Which was quickly followed by another moment of blinding clarity. “Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me you don’t believe I’m wearing a diaphragm? Do you think I’m trying to set you up?”

“Of course not, but if something were to happen, if you got—”

His head snapped back, Leslie’s slap a dead-on connect. “*You son of a bitch*.” She shoved past him, kicking the kitchen door opened. “Where are the goddamned car keys? Lee can get his ride when he’s done fucking his whore. *Your* whore’s driving herself home.”

He whirled her around, his face crimson. “Now, wait a minute!”

“Let go of me!”

“No,” he said, clamped onto her upper arms. “Not until you listen to me.”

“Listen to you say *what*?” She struggled against him. “That I’m a liar? That I’m out to get you? You ought to remember this was all your idea, Congressman. You went after me, not the other way around!”

“Yeah, I went after you,” he said, almost sneering. “Because everyone knows the best way to win an election is to hook up with a woman married to an accused felon. If anything, that ought to ensure the church vote.”

She slapped his chest. “Then what is it? Is it just because you want to get back at Ted? To fuck your enemy’s wife?”

His eyes went wild. “You’re not his wife, not anymore.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not yours!”

His hands tightened around her. “You’re something more than that.”

She looked at him, exasperated. “How could you ever say something like—”

“Because I love you,” he said, his voice a rasp of raw emotion. “I love you and I don’t deserve you, because no matter how bad you think you are for me, believe me, I’m ten times worse for you.” He let go of her, turning into the breakfast room. He went to the table, falling heavily into a chair.

Leslie stared at his back for a long moment, blindsided. She had a few pictures in her head of where this unlikely liaison would take her, but never in her dreams did she think it would come to this. *He loved her*. She examined the idea a bit, letting it sink into her psyche like a tossed pebble sends a pond rippling. It wasn’t an unpleasant scenario; as a matter of fact, it was dangerously close to how she was feeling herself. But it was wrong for both of them, and she knew it.

“Talk to me,” she said, sitting opposite him.

He looked up, smiling weakly. “I’m a coward.”

She took his hand, lacing her fingers into his. “I think you’re one of the bravest people I know. You do what you believe in and damn the consequences.”

“Which doesn’t make it right. Leslie, I’m no good for you.”

She squeezed his hand. “Then you’d better tell me why.”

He let go, leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the dark outside the window. “It’s hard to explain, so maybe I’ll just give you a brief history. The family business is politics, my father, my grandfathers, and too many to count before them. On my mother’s side I even have a signer of the Declaration of Independence. But as good as we are at winning elections, we’re just as bad at not hurting the people we’re supposed to love, and Leslie?” He looked at her. “I never want to do that to you.”

“But why do you think you would?” she said softly.

“Because I know the way this business is. And I know the way I can be.” He pulled his hand from her. “This business is a killer, but I’m programmed to never give up. And when I go after something I usually get it. And I want you. More than anyone—more than *anything*—I’ve ever wanted. And that scares the crap out of me.”

“But Jack, that’s ridiculous. What could you possibly—”

“I told myself I’d never get married,” he continued. “Never have any kids. I wouldn’t put my family through what my bastard of a father did to my mother. Wouldn’t have her come home one day to find her husband fucking another woman in her own bed. Have her find out later that fucking other women was something her husband was pretty good at. And so good at hiding it from her that everyone knew except dear old Mother.” His fists clenched against his legs, his face going hard. “Because it’s not the infidelity that kills you, you know, not really. It’s the fact that you’re being made a fool. And out of the dozens of things my mother could do extremely well, being a fool wasn’t one of them. So it slowly ate away at all the wonderful things she was until the day she died, when there was nothing left of her but a lot of regret she didn’t deserve.”

She reached forward, touching his leg. “But you wouldn’t do that, Jack. I don’t see it in you.”

“I see it in me. Believe me, it’s inbred. And that’s the risk, my dear, I’m not willing to take. I would never hurt you. Ever.”

Leslie slid to the floor, moving between his splayed legs. She wrapped her arms around his waist, laying her head against his chest, a longing swelling within her like nothing she’d ever felt before. “You can’t hurt me, Jack. I won’t let you. And you can’t

keep me from you, either. I'm not going anywhere."

He kissed the top of her head. "You have no idea what you're getting into."

"Neither do you, but you don't have a choice anymore. Try to make me leave."

He smiled into her hair. "I do love you, Leslie."

She looked up. "Show me."

He pushed back the chair and standing up, lifted her into his arms. He carried her past the picture of his grandmother, past the soup tureens, past all the history that seeped into the walls and floorboards like smoke and out into the living room and up the staircase and down the long hall. And into the bedroom, leaving the door wide open.

Chapter Eight

When Jack set Leslie on his bed he had the strangest feeling she'd been there before. That somehow he had seen her hair loose across the heirloom bedspread, spilling around her head like flax, her blue eyes bright with expectation. That somehow, just like now, she had held out her arms to welcome him in, and he had lowered himself over her, taking her mouth with his. That in that distant remembrance, she had tasted just as she did now, sweet and electric, and he had cradled her head in his hands, that flaxen hair so soft, her scent filling him with wonder, her breath rising with his.

And right then he knew: it wasn't because she'd been there before. It was because she belonged there now. She was in the exact place she should be.

She *fit*.

He kissed her, his tongue exploring, his fingers tracing the sinks and hills of her face, her skin both cool and fevered. Then his hand drifted down, caressing the tender swell of her breast as it shuddered under his touch, astonishing him he could induce such a reaction. It thrilled him like nothing he had ever done before, half-covering her small body with the hard length of his. She sighed, sliding her own hands lower until they settled at the small of his back, her fingers kneading the taut flesh until he felt every muscle in his body contract, then ease, a spasm of relief rippling through him. He groaned with pleasure, kissing her more deeply. She smiled back, her hand on his hip. Then she pushed herself away, standing up.

Which was exactly the opposite of what he expected. He rolled to his side, his face questioning hers, but she simply extended her hand. He took it—it was so much

smaller!—and let her guide him to his feet. When he faced her she slipped her fingers to his chest and undid his buttons one at a time, adding a place-exchange kiss for every one unfastened until she was on her knees at the last. He arched his arms back and his shirt fell to the floor.

His trousers were still undone and she unzipped him, placing another kiss against the soft downiness that trailed from his flat belly, past his navel. But instead of traveling lower, she slid her hands down his legs to his shoes, untying the Oxfords—well polished and jet black—to slip them and his socks from his feet. When she did she bent even lower, kissing the very tips of his toes. He gasped in surprise, half laughing, half inordinately touched, reaching to pull her back up. But she evaded this attempt, latching onto his legs, and hugging and twisting until his trousers puddled at his ankles. From there she lifted each foot and slid them off. When she was finished, again, she bent to his feet and, starting at his ankles, kissed and licked his flinching legs until she was circling his knees with her tongue.

Jack was finding it very hard to stand. But he also knew if he tried to stop her or move even an inch away, this pocket goddess in front of him would not be pleased. So he endured her exquisite torture, even giving her a hand by bracing his legs slightly apart. But then her hot little tongue found the inside of his thigh and standing became the least of his problems—he was finding it equally hard to breathe. His hand reached to the bed's footboard, and just in the nick of time. Her own hands slid to his shorts, her thumbs hooking into the waistband. Then down they came, over his hips, and a certain member was ready to burst. His trousers fell with a *plop* to the floor. After she slipped them over his feet, she sat back on her haunches and looked up.

And down.

And up.

Settling happily—as she grinned, quite broadly—in the middle. She licked her lips and pushed up on her knees, her hand curling around him as Jack's clawed into the footboard, bracing.

At the first flick, he nearly shot through the ceiling. With her hand curled around his cock, her tongue circling and nipping and mercilessly teasing its already slick head, it was all he could manage to hold himself back. But it seemed she had more barbarisms to commit on him, evidenced by her trailing lower and lower, down his ever-hardening shaft, following the tight veining until she was at his balls, where she opened her mouth, taking one in. She sucked and licked one, then the other. Jack's hand palmed her head just to stay upright. He closed his eyes at the bliss of it, his groin tightening as the pleasure built. Leslie licked the flat little spot behind his scrotum which shot through his core like a lightning bolt. He groaned, feeling his knees weaken, ready to pull her off him—then she changed tactics, angling his cock to her mouth, where she opened wide and took him down her throat.

His hips bucked, caught by surprise. Then she began to move, and it was simply the most intense sensation he had ever felt in his life. His heart thumped, his hands clenched, his mind scrambled for coherence as suddenly she splayed her hand across his ass and pulled him closer. A second later she was in motion, going at him like a finely lubed piston.

It was remarkable.

His head spun, his ankles jellied, his cock felt ready to blow. Yet he was in

heaven—deliriously so, flying high in one fat fellatio nirvana. He leaned back and arched his hips to her, pushing toward her mouth, so lost in the building sensation, so gone as his juices began to rise, that he nearly forgot where he was. All at once an incredible urgency overtook him, one without a second to waste. His gaze shot to the woman before him, clothed and on her knees. Still dazed, he yanked himself from her. She started, looking up. He pulled her to her feet.

He didn't think, working on instinct now. His arm went around her and down went her zipper, down and down until her slid her gown to the floor. Underneath lay a veritable cornucopia of male fantasy: a lacy bra pushing her breasts to delicious heights, a garter belt whose ribbons connected to the silk of her stockings, four-inch black heels that made his cock twitch just looking at them. He slid his hand to her panty-less pussy, slipping a finger inside her. She groaned, smiling wickedly, reflexively clamping around him. If she got any wetter, he'd drown. He whirled her around and she fell to the bed. Then he opened her legs and dove in.

She gasped when he entered her, his eyes rolling back in his head. He placed his hands over her knees and pushed them back, his hands hooking under her spiky heels as he began to methodically pound her. Her head lolled to the side and she licked her already glistening lips, moaning softly, looking so indescribably beautiful she fairly glowed beneath him. He leaned into her, bit the clasp of her bra and with his teeth, he twisted, the cups snapping apart. Her nipples looked as hard as granite so he latched on, sucking until she cried out and her back lifted off the bed. She looped an arm around his neck and pulled his mouth to hers, nipping his tongue. He pressed her legs even further back, easing his cock out to flick against her clit. She yelped, and he flicked again and

again until she screamed and down he went full inside her, burying himself to the hilt.

A flash went off in his head and suddenly everything inside him rushed toward her, dragging with it all that was perfect and exquisite and irrational. But he didn't care. Not an iota or an inch. Because it went beyond the mindless bliss he was feeling at the precise second that that primordial mix of sugars and proteins and suspended DNA shot not into latex, but into her. Simmering somewhere beyond the extraordinary climax he was riding was the fact his gametic combination had never entered any human being other than her, and that alone should have proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that what he was feeling, he had never felt before.

And, as he reeled to closure, looking down at the softly panting Leslie, he realized he could never, ever feel this way with anyone other than her.

“Good golly...” she wheezed, chaotically lovely. “That was...that was...”

“Fucking magnificent,” he whispered, letting go of her legs. He slipped his arms beneath her and rolled them to the side, his cock still throbbing inside her as he brushed his lips against hers. “You’re amazing.”

She kissed him, snuggling closer. “So are you. I’m pretty sure no man has ever made me feel like you have.”

He smiled; he couldn't ever explain how good it felt to hear it. He kissed her forehead. “Sweetheart, we haven't even gotten started.”

He slid himself from her and eased up, and after he slipped her bra from her, he kissed each of her breasts and lay her back, going to work on the rest. He lifted her legs and off came her shoes, then her stockings. He kissed his way from her bottom to her pussy. She gave him a hand and squeezed herself out of the garter belt, and soon she was

beautifully naked. Jack was frozen from the sight, his heart clenching. She laughed, hopped from the bed, and scuttled into the bathroom.

He caught up with her as she bent over the sink, her hair pushed back, her face still damp and dripping, his toothbrush in her mouth. He came up behind her and kissed her neck. She spit into the sink, ran the brush under the water, spread some paste on it and shoved it in his mouth, perching on the sink's counter to watch. When he finished he grabbed the soap and gave his face a good scrub. Leslie laughed, so he shoved his face into hers, leaving a glop of suds on her chin. She squealed, her hand diving to the running faucet to send a torrent of water against his chest. His revenge was simple. He slid her to the edge of the sink, and drove himself inside her.

Already slick, he stroked her easily, and it didn't take long at all. And this time, as if on cue, they rose together, so much sweeter, if less frantic, than before. She kissed him, just as he stilled, her fingers lost in his hair.

"I love the way you feel inside me," she whispered.

His heart filled, expanded. "And I love you."

He lifted her up, holding her against his chest, kissing her as they went back to the bedroom. He pulled back the covers and set her down, crawling in behind her after he turned out the light. With his arm around her, he pulled her against his chest, and she settled just under his chin. She felt light and sated and spent, and he sighed, breathing in her warmth. As she drifted into sleep, as his leg aligned with hers, as his fingers closed over her hand, he relaxed with a now-comforting realization. It didn't matter anymore; damn them all. This was the way it was.

He shut his eyes. She *fit*.

* * * *

Leslie had been awake for more than an hour, unable to sleep, the brass clock beside his bed just turning to five thirty. She had eased herself out of Jack's arms—the man had a possessively tight clutch, it warmed her to realize—and crept into the bathroom. There she indulged in a little luxury, a few moments of privacy to shower and wash her hair, rinsing out her underwear to hang on a towel bar beside some very expensive-looking terry. Expensive *and* long-wearing, she knew, meaning it was also very practical. Much like the brass faucets, the water-saving toilet, the porcelain tile, the hardwood floors, right down to the fluorescent bulbs in the lamps and the solar panels on the roof.

She took everything in, especially now as she sat back on her heels, her hair wrapped in a towel, her body floating in his huge shirt. Surrounded by Falco practicality, Leslie allowed herself another luxury: watching Jack.

He lay on his side, his leg bent, his hand under his chin like a little boy. She smiled, nearly laughing out loud at the thought of him in a booster seat, a stuffed rabbit in his arms. As she watched this big alpha male sleep, his broad back rising and falling, his long leg stretched to the end of the mattress, his dark hair so mussed his signature gray streaks were nearly hidden, she tried to picture him with his thumb in his mouth. It was hard to imagine, yet it wasn't. Because as much as she lusted after the man, she also sensed a vulnerability in him she ached to explore. Which definitely presented a conundrum as on the surface, he seemed as impervious as steel. Yet hadn't that always been what she hated most about his class?

She shifted to sit cross-legged against the headboard. In this day and age and

country, one wouldn't think that class would matter, but she knew it did. At least it had when she was growing up. She'd seen it firsthand, trailing behind her immigrant Polish mother as she cleaned other country *maisons* such as this, her father long gone to junk and gin; eating off food stamps; wearing clothes from boxes anonymously left on their doorstep. Leslie caught the condescending shakes of their heads, the couple of dollars she'd find in her coat pocket after she shoved her lemon-oiled arms into it as they rode the bus home. She hated their faux sympathetic smiles, and the leftover dinner party food her mother would tote home in the *pani's* Tupperware. She endured it all, and slowly plotted the best revenge: to have none of their advantages, yet still succeed.

By being smart and capable, she did. Until the upper scions of this rotten class turned on her and blew it all to hell.

She lifted her wrist, his onyx and diamond cufflinks faint winks in the dim light, and turned his collar to her nose. She breathed him in, her eyes fluttering. *Good Lord, he was intoxicating.* In so many ways. The power behind him, the vulnerability within, the strength that radiated through it all. If she allowed herself, it would be very easy to fall in love with Jack Falco. If she wasn't already.

She slid down the mattress, facing him.

His eyes opened. "What are you looking at?"

She pressed her knee against his thigh. "You, you big lug."

He smiled sleepily, hooking his leg over hers. "You look good in my shirt. Even if it looks like it's going to swallow you whole."

"That's because you're freaking huge." Her gaze dipped dramatically. "*Everywhere.*" He arched a brow at her and turned on his back. "Not that I'm

complaining,” she said, climbing up to straddle him.

“Not you.” He yanked the end of the towel, her still-damp hair tumbling down around her shoulders. “*Jesus*,” he breathed, hardening under her.

That’s all the encouragement she needed. She slowly undid the few buttons fastened on his shirt and shrugged it off, her nakedness feeling liberating and licentious and oh-so-very empowering. She raised her hands and dug her fingers into her long hair, tossing it, her breasts perking over her slim waist which, from the look of it, made Jack’s mouth go very, very dry. She wanted to squeal with joy. How long had it been since she felt this sexy, this desired, this beddable? She didn’t think she ever felt this way with Ted. Maybe because he could never seem to feel this way with her.

Suddenly she felt Jack’s fingers grazing the underside of her breasts, first one, then the other, the tops of his fingers skittering down her belly to her hips, his hands settling lightly atop them. In the pale light she noticed how closely he watched her, actually studying her, so she turned the same rapt attention on him. For a Congressman, a lawyer, a pampered patrician, he had very strong shoulders, a proportionately wide chest, muscular abs and slightly calloused palms. And more than a few scattered scars, making her wonder where a government man would find the time or effort to gain any of it.

“Leslie,” he whispered, breaking her reverie.

He had one singularly pained look on his face. *Oh, this was so very sweet*. She set her palms to his chest and, lifting up, slid herself down his cock.

She closed her eyes, nearly purring. He felt far and beyond anything she’d every experienced, and maybe she knew why. Maybe it was the fact she was still married with a husband in jail, and he was a congressman running for governor. A scandal with a timer

just waiting to *ding*! Nothing like the lure of the forbidden to make for one delicious thrill ride.

He moved his hips, languidly swiveling beneath her. She arched over him, her breasts hovering above his mouth. He latched onto one, sucking, groaning, speeding up. She tilted her head onto her shoulder, a charge shooting straight to her pussy. How she loved what he did to her.

His hands roamed to her backside, and she dropped to his chest, stretching out atop him, the tips of her toes reaching to the tops of his feet. He leaned up and glanced his lips over hers. Leslie began to move, her motion opposite to his, easing in and out of her, causing the most exquisite friction. She pushed up, angling herself for greater contact, his hands clamping onto her bottom to draw her in even tighter. When he squeezed, the sensation spread like wildfire and she erupted, shuddering against him.

“That’s it, that’s it,” he said, laughing throatily. “I love to watch you come.” And she did, with near seismic force, her vagina clamping around him until he, too, let loose, his hips shaking as he emptied himself into her. When they were through he fell back against the bed, Leslie slumping heavily atop him.

“My, my, another record-breaker,” she said, fairly panting, snuggling into his chest. “We keep this up, we’ll never make the election, don’t you think?”

But the only answer she got was his soft snores. So she tucked herself into the crook of his arm, and gathering the covers over them, promptly fell asleep.

* * * *

When Jack awoke he found Leslie standing next to the window wearing his old plaid robe, which nearly reached the tops of her saggy-socked ankles. With her hair

loosely gathered into a ponytail, she looked so cute he wanted to eat her alive.

“Well, good morning,” he said, leaning up on his elbow.

“Just what kind of farm are you running here?” she said over her shoulder.

He scratched his head and yawned, grabbing a pair of jeans from a chair nearby.

“Why?” he said, yanking them on as went to her side. “See something suspicious?”

“No, smart ass,” she said, ribbing him. “It’s just that I thought I saw a horse.”

“You find that kind of strange?” He slung his arm over her shoulder, looking out to the frosty field below, the right side bordered by thick forest. “It’s not like they’re mythical creatures or anything.”

She laughed, tweaking his side. “Well, thank you for that, Einstein. I really needed you to tell me that. It’s just that you usually see horses in paddocks or barns, but I think I saw a pinto run into those woods there.”

“That’s probably Chico. He’s partial to the sedge growing near an old foundation a couple of hundred yards in.” He went to his dresser and pulled out a T-shirt and a pair of socks. “So you’re not dreaming after all.”

“What do you mean ‘probably’? Is he wild?”

He yanked the T-shirt over his head and dropped to a chair. “This is New Jersey, sweetheart, not Montana. Of course he’s not wild. He’s mine. It’s just that sometimes I get them mixed up. I have a couple of pintos—no, wait.” He thought a moment. “Oh right, Essie’s a paint. And pregnant, too.”

She stared at him. “Just how many horses do you have?”

“A couple of dozen, with four foals due in the spring.”

“So you’re a breeder.”

He grinned, yanking on his socks. “Now who’s the Einstein?”

When she smacked his shoulder, he grabbed her waist, pulling her into his lap.

“Spill,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Yes, I’m a breeder. I raise Argentine Criollos. They’re really hardy saddle horses known for their endurance, mostly used as cowponies in South America. But I also raise quarter horses and breed them with Criollos for polo ponies.” He arched a brow, regarding her dryly. “Now go ahead and tell me how elitist that is.”

She put up her hands. “Hey, I’m not saying a word.”

“Good. Because if you want to get really snooty, my mother’s family used to raise Thoroughbreds for fox hunting. I took the rails out years ago and put in a hay field.”

“I’m not passing judgment. If you want to let your horses run wild in the woods, that’s fine with me.”

“They’re not running wild.”

“Well, I don’t see a fence.”

“That’s because you’re not looking.” He nudged her off his lap and got up, pulling her to the window. “Now look.”

She peered into the glass, and after a long moment she said, “All right, I see it, but it’s way, way out there.” She turned to him. “Just how many acres do you have?”

He set his hands to his hips, exhaling slowly. “Twenty-two hundred.”

Her eyes widened. “Excuse me? What is this, South Fork?”

“It’s not all pastureland and it not all here. A lot of it is wooded and all of it’s protected. That means it could never be developed. And that includes the bogs.”

“*Bogs?*”

He could feel his neck heating. “Cranberry bogs. My family’s raised cranberries since the Civil War.”

Leslie leaned back against the window, gripping the sill. “So the polo ponies are just a sideline. The real dough’s in berries.”

This was all so very embarrassing. “You could say that.”

She crooked her head. “Just how rich are you?”

“You really want to know?”

“No, but you’re going to have to tell me anyway.”

A long pause. “I’m comfortable.”

“How comfortable?”

“Very.”

“But you must have lost some in the stock crash.”

Really embarrassing. “No. I’ve a trust fund, and it’s pretty well recession-proof.”

“Golly. How lucky you must feel to be you.”

He could see her reddening, her hands fisting, and he wasn’t sure if it was from anger or frustration or something he couldn’t even try to define. But one thing was for certain. He would not let her leave his home until she told him why, and she understood the real meaning of this place. He reached out to her, taking her hand.

“Leslie, I can only imagine with you’re thinking, but believe me, so many things have nothing to do with wealth. Some things you can’t ever put a price on, and that’s what this place means to me.” He pulled her into his arms, kissing her forehead. “Will you let me show it to you?”

When she looked up at him, her face was filled with skepticism, although it

softened considerably. “Of course, Jack. I couldn’t possibly leave without getting the full tour.”

He squeezed her. “Good. But first I’m going to make you a big farmer’s breakfast. Are you hungry?”

She laughed. “I believe I could eat a horse.”

“Good, because after we eat you’re going to ride one.”

She stared at him, aghast. “But I don’t know how to ride!”

He slid his hand down her bottom, grinning wickedly. “Who says you don’t?”

Chapter Nine

“Here you go,” Jack said, handing Leslie a neatly folded pile of clothes. “Pick out something warm, and I’ll meet you downstairs in the kitchen.” He grinned. “That is, if you don’t need my help.”

She took them, half closing his bedroom door on his foot. “I can dress myself just fine, thank you.”

But before she could shut it, he poked his head in. “Come here,” he breathed and, tugging the tie of her robe, pulled her in for a kiss. “Have I told you how much I like having you as a roommate?”

She nipped the corner of his coffee-flavored mouth. “No, but I get the implication.”

“Well, here’s something else. I like having you in my bed even more.”

She sighed, ready to jump back into it. “Is that an invitation?”

His hand curled around her hip. “A standing one.”

“So that means anytime?”

He stared at her for a long moment. Then cleared his throat. “Anytime but now.”

“Because we’ll never get out of here...”

His green eyes simmered, Leslie fairly certain he was weighing the options. “Something like that.” He kissed her again. “See you downstairs.” He left.

She was left wondering what he’d left unsaid. She turned from the door to his tousled bed, a burn rushing over her. It *was* wonderful being in his bed. So wonderful, she was quickly getting used to it. She dropped the clothes to a chair, and turned to throw

the covers back in place. She was fairly certain he had little elves that would later take care of it, but somehow the idea of anyone seeing the bed in its currently disheveled state would be more than a little embarrassing. Then again, was it something they had long gotten used to? She couldn't even consider the thought. She smoothed the last wrinkle, then hurried to get dressed.

Leslie rummaged through the pile of clothes, picking out a pair of jeans, a turtleneck and a cabled pullover. Apparently Selma was just about her size but taller, so the jeans collected a bit at her heels. But the clothes were of very good quality, and she suspected the Latina was a bit more than a domestic. She then dug through Jack's sock drawer, finding a several pairs of thick boot socks among the neatly folded or rolled silks and cottons. She idly thought how comforting it must be to know exactly what you needed was always at your disposal. Like a wardrobe for every possible occasion, whether in Haddonfield or Washington, Riverboro, or Atlantic City, or especially at your country manse. She huffed, retreating to the bed; even in her own head, she was starting to sound shrewish. As she pulled on the socks she reminded herself this little jaunt was exactly that. He could tell her he loved her all he wanted but in the end—

She went to the mirror, gathering her hair into a ponytail. In the end, it *would* end. She took a plaid scarf from the pile and wrapping it around her neck, left for the kitchen.

He was sipping coffee from a travel mug when she caught up with him. Dressed in jeans, well-worn cowboy boots, and a T-shirt under a cotton flannel shirt, he looked like he had just ridden in from the range. But the most amazing thing about it was he seemed as at home in work clothes as he had in his tuxedo. And, she knew as she went to the counter, just as breathtaking.

“One for the road?” he said, tilting his cup.

“Please,” she said, and he slid another mug over. As she poured, she added, “Many thanks for the clothes, but I do think I’m going to need something for my feet.”

His eyes hooded, his hips shifting against the counter. “I believe you already have a pair under my bed.”

She fingered a shirt button. “And I believe you have a thing for spike heels.”

He dipped his head to kiss her, his nose brushing hers. “Only when you’re in them. Now follow me.”

Right off the kitchen was a mudroom, still neat for its description, but obviously used as a gate stop for appropriately monikered accoutrements. There were rain slickers on hooks, hats and coats on racks, ancient caned chairs atop its well-worn wooden planked floors, several pairs of green Wellington boots in the corner, a bathroom off the side with a deep, tri-hulled sink, and, next to where Jack stood, a closet with a louvered door.

He pulled it open. “I think you’ll find something in here.”

Leslie peered into it. On the floor were several pairs of boots in various styles and sizes and degrees of wear. “Now I’m just thinking you have a foot fetish.”

He snorted. “Believe it or not, people have left them here over the years. Why throw out a good pair of boots?”

“You wouldn’t happen to have any Scottish in that genetic stew of yours, would you?”

His eyes widened. “How did you know? My mother was a MacDougal and my father’s grandmother came from Inverness.”

“By way of Rome?”

“Actually, from Siena, but that was way, way, back.” He squatted beside her. “But what does that have to do with anything?” His shoulders squared. “There’s nothing wrong with being practical.” He plucked out a pair of black cowboy boots with white stitching. “Here, I’ll bet these’ll fit. Try them on.”

She eyed him, but did. They were well broken in, yet fit perfectly. Leslie stood, stamping them down. “Now you’re just scaring me.”

“Good.” He grinned, plopping a cap on her head, and tossed her a field coat as he pulled his own on. “You’ll find gloves in your pockets. Now let’s go.”

The early morning was cold and bone-chillingly dry, although a faint pink in the southwestern sky threatened snow. They walked from the house across a graveled drive to a barn in the distance, passing a neat saltbox with a wide front porch about a hundred feet off.

“That’s where Diego and Selma live,” Jack said. “Diego’s my trainer, and Selma runs the farm.”

“I figured they were probably more than just the hired help.”

Jack took her arm, steering her around a puddle of ice and mud. “I should say so. I wouldn’t be able to keep this place without them.” He pointed to a long, low building and three more much smaller houses a couple of hundred feet past the saltbox. “That long building is a dormitory for the farmhands and grooms, and the houses are for the help who have families.”

“Wow,” said Leslie. “You’re running a plantation here, aren’t you?”

His mouth crooked. “It gets pretty busy around here certain times of the year,

especially during the cranberry harvest. But we also grow soybeans, alfalfa, corn, tomatoes, straw, *and* strawberries.” He kicked a rock to the side of the path. “We have a strawberry festival here every June. It’s kind of a town tradition. Everybody comes.”

“Has your family been here a long time?”

“Five generations,” he said as they came up to the barn. He threw the door open and they entered into a pungently warm mix of straw, hay and horse.

The barn held a long center hall with stalls on either side, a packed earthen floor beneath. Leslie followed him past several grooms in various stages of horse caretaking from mucking stalls to cleaning hooves to brushing down to feeding and watering.

“Criollos are tough little buggers,” he said, holding his palm out so a little chocolate-colored horse could nuzzle it. “Down on the Pampa they live strictly on what they can forage. Here we tend to make their mealtimes a little easier, right, girl?” He reached in his pocket and treated her with an apple. She chomped it up, muzzling him appreciatively. “They hate being inside, but it looks like snow, so I figured we’d better bring them in.”

Leslie shyly stroked her nose. “What’s her name?”

“Miranda.” He scratched her short, pointy ear and she snorted, tossing her head.

“Ooh!” Leslie squeaked, her hand flying away. “I think she hates me!”

Jack scratched her thick neck. “Miranda couldn’t hate a flea, right, baby?” he cooed and she whinnied, shoving her head into Leslie. “See? She loves you.”

“Oh my!” she cried. “I think it’s tough love.”

He smiled. “Maybe it is.” He crooked his head. “Come on.”

As they walked through the barn, Leslie noticed he took the time to greet each

groom and ask how they were doing, how their families were, how went the progress of their charges. Jack Falco the Farmer seemed as wildly popular with his help as Jack Falco the Congressman was with his constituents, and just like when he was on stage giving a speech or quietly listening to a concern, he seemed to bloom under attention given or received. Here was a man who clearly needed to be needed, she concluded, whether it was breeding a bill or a berry or a pony. In fact, he fairly thrived on it. Yet for all this intimate involvement in the lives of others, why was he so determined to deny it in himself? Obviously it was displacement, she concluded. For what other reason would he be so fearless when it came to seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but so hesitant in tackling his own?

She ran her hand over the seat of a saddle, its well-oiled leather slick and sturdy. An analogy yawned in the back of her mind, but she refused to acknowledge it, because it wouldn't quite be fair. Not when she had her own demons to dodge.

“Diego!” Jack cried. “*Hola!*”

She watched him as he strode toward the man entering the barn from the other end. The man's face lit, his hand extended. He was of medium build but very muscular, and like Selma, about Jack's age. They greeted each other warmly, both speaking in animated Spanish. *So he's bilingual*, she thought, not surprised a bit. After a minute more Jack called her over.

He slipped his hand to her shoulder. “Diego, this is my very special friend, Leslie. Leslie—Diego, the real *jefe* here.”

Diego laughed, flashing perfect teeth. “The Congressman has quite a sense of humor, no?” He clasped her hand between his. “*Bienvenido*, Leslie. I hope you're

enjoying your visit.”

His very dark eyes fairly bled with sincerity. “I am,” she said, “though your ponies kind of scare me.”

“These ponies?” He laughed again. “They have hearts of gold, and believe me, the way Jack spoils them, they’re nothing but a pack of babies.” He leaned in. “See, he’s not as tough as he tries to be.”

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

He smiled. “Oh, you’ll learn, you will!”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “Hey, now!”

Leslie laughed, liking Diego immediately.

After Jack finished with Diego, they continued through the long barn, Leslie noticing some horses were larger and taller than the squat, thick Criollos. And Jack seemed to notice her noticing.

He stopped at the stall of a big Palomino. “That’s because they’re quarter horses. This one here is Teddy.” He stepped into the stall, patting his flank. “He and Miranda get along very well. In fact, he’s sired two foals for her.”

She propped a foot to the stall gate. “Nice to know your ponies play so well together.”

“I strive for harmony, as you can see firsthand.” He looked to a groom just outside the stall. “Tony, could you saddle up Miranda and bring her out front, please?”

“Oh no.” Leslie stepped back. “Jack, I told you, I don’t know how to ride.”

“Then it’s fortunate you’ll have the best teacher in the world.” He clipped a lead to Teddy’s halter and walked him out, cross-tying him between stalls to saddle him.

Leslie came up beside him. “The closest I’ve ever come to a any kind of horse was the mechanical one outside the supermarket. I’m telling you, I haven’t a clue.”

He tsked, slipping the bridle over Teddy’s head. “For shame. And the horse is the New Jersey state animal.”

The horse stamped his foot; Leslie jumped. “Jack, come on! They really scare—”

“Leslie.” He glanced over his shoulder and pulled her into the tack room. “I really want to show you my farm, and riding my horse is really the best way to see it. Please believe me, I would never let anything happen to you.” He touched her cheek. “Miranda is as gentle as a baby, a real sweetie. Won’t you ride her for me? Please?”

She looked into his eyes, now a deep, deep green. She knew if it took her a hundred years, she still wouldn’t be able to figure out why they always turned her into a quivering lump of jelly. “All right,” she said. “I’ll ride your pony. But I’m telling you right now, if I fall off, I will *not* get back on.”

He grinned, the little boy in him back again. “You won’t fall off. Now come on.”

It took a couple of tries, but Leslie eventually hoisted herself onto Miranda. With Jack on the big Palomino showing her the essential points of Western riding, she finally agreed she was able enough to ride, as long as she didn’t have to remove her death grip from the saddlehorn.

They rode into the woods where he led her to the crumbling foundation of the original big house, and the last of the drying sedge that Chico liked to nibble. Riding deeper, they passed a stream that widened to a pond and eventually turned into a creek, crossing over an old wooden bridge that his grandfather built, and onto an old Indian trail that had once been part of a stagecoach route, now mostly hidden by forest. They passed

the spring strawberry patch and the summer tomato and sweet corn fields, past where he grew the alfalfa and the horse corn, and the soybeans, two crops a year. They rode out to a clearing where they could see Arney's Mount, misted by clouds and browned by winter, and to a big ledge that looked out over a bend in the creek, where Jack used to come as a boy to read first comic books, then science fiction, then Machiavelli and Jefferson. By the time they passed the straw field they were heading toward the little town center, not more than a crossroad, but one with a tavern that served some pretty decent food. Since it was getting close to noon, Jack decided to tie the horses out back and grab some lunch, their farmer's breakfast of eggs, pancakes, and bacon long spent.

By this time, Leslie was getting the hang of it. Miranda was proving to be a real sweetie after all. "Are we going to ride past your cranberry bogs, too?" she said, dipping into her steaming bowl of potato leek soup, crusty bread, poached pears on the side.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he said, beaming. "Your nose and cheeks are as red as apples." He squeezed her hand. "You look adorable."

Her faced heated, those rosy cheeks undoubtedly getting rosier. "Jack, the bogs?"

He tore off a hunk of bread and dropped it into his soup. "No, we'll drive to them tomorrow. After this, there's one more thing I'd like to show you."

"What?" she said, getting excited.

"Well, I'll give you this. It involves a tool and a little work."

She hadn't noticed the rope he had tied to his saddle and the sheet of canvas behind it. But another short ride, which turned out to be just across the street and down a little ways from his farm, led them to a field with nothing but evergreens, a shed decorated with red and green lights, and more than a few people browsing the strawed

paths between rows.

“You’re getting a Christmas tree!” Leslie cried, dismounting. “But how do you plan on bringing it back?”

“The same way they did it before SUVs,” he said. With a slight alteration, she deduced. Because she was fairly sure the tree-getters of yesteryear didn’t have a plastic netting machine, which bundled the eight-foot Douglas fir they eventually picked out and wrapped in the canvas. But they more than likely had a length of rope to tie from the tree to Jack’s saddlehorn, which allowed him to drag it behind him.

“Ingenious,” Leslie remarked, just as it began to snow. She regarded the turn in the weather, glancing at the tree. “Oh, this is becoming a cliché.”

“We’re a full-service fantasy, ma’am,” he said, tipping his hat.

He left the tree on the back porch before they returned the horses to the barn. There, he and Leslie unsaddled Teddy and Miranda and brushed them down, leaving them fresh alfalfa and water before turning them into the stalls. By the time they left the barn it was nearing on sunset and snowing full force. Before they went in Jack unbundled the tree, leaving it in the mudroom to dry out.

“Hungry?” Jack asked, shaking snow and pine needles from him.

“Starved,” she said, dropping her boots to the floor. “But this time I’d really like to cook for you. If that’s all right.”

He shrugged off his coat and kicked off his boot. “Perfectly. Just let me show you what we’ve got.”

With his hair tousled and his checked flannel shirt, Leslie could picture him as a lumberjack. “Lead the way.”

Apparently those suspect little elves had visited Jack's larder while they were out riding, leaving behind a steak, salad greens, clementines and a half-dozen chocolate-chip cannoli. Leslie decided the weather warranted something a bit more hardy, and diced the sirloin for a thick beef stew, adding some biscuits from scratch to sop up the gravy.

"And she cooks, too," Jack said, pouring out some very fine Burgundy from his personal cache.

Leslie eyed the rich red wine. "Wine cellar in the basement?"

"Oak casks," he said, swirling the glass to watch its legs. "Tended by monks."

"It's good to be the king, isn't it?"

His mouth crooked. "Wench, you have no idea."

But she could surmise. As she did the dishes, Jack hauled in the tree and set it up, just opposite the fireplace, which he of course set to roaring. When she came in from the kitchen, he had also hauled down the decorations, and with Schumann playing in the background and the occasional sip of brandy, they trimmed the tree. It was afterwards, just as Leslie brought out the cannoli and coffee and Jack plugged in the lights, just as they retreated to the sofa—snow falling, fire blazing—that Leslie realized just how great being King could feel.

Could, she realized, being the operative word.

He pulled her close, kissing her forehead. "Spend Christmas with me."

That took her aback; it was only a few days away. "Why, I—"

"I actually have a pretty big family. My cousins and uncles and aunts come for Christmas Eve, and the aunts do the seven fishes for dinner, and it gets loud and crazy and we all have a great time."

She sat back. “It sounds wonderful.”

“And on Christmas Day, we can go to my mother’s sister’s house, my Aunt Lila.”

He laughed. “She’s nutty as a loon, has six parrots and keeps terrariums all over her house filled with lizards, but she’s funny as hell and has some definite political opinions. Especially since her husband’s a Libertarian. I think you’d love her.”

“I think I would, too, but Jack...” There was no easy way to put this. “How will you explain me? My notoriety aside, I really don’t want them to think of me just as another of your—”

“Another one of my *what?*” His eyes darkened. “Leslie, I don’t think you get what I’m saying here. I want you to meet my family. I’ve never done that with anyone.”

She thought of last Christmas, spent at Ted’s parents. Now they were too embarrassed to even look her in the eye. “So why start with me?”

“Christ, woman, isn’t it obvious?” He seized her, pushing her back against the sofa. “I *love* you.”

He kissed her deeply and thoroughly, and Leslie’s head swam, because every time he did she got closer to the point where pulling back would be impossible, a place where logic and sanity warned her she shouldn’t ever go.

She pulled herself away. “Jack, this is crazy. I’m married! Married to a *scandal*. I’m sure the media would see it as wonderful that your campaign hired me, but if they ever found out we were intimately involved, you know damn well you could kiss being governor goodbye. “

“They’ll never find out.”

“Famous last words!”

“I won’t give you up. And you have no idea the secrets I can keep.”

She wanted to throttle him. “You can’t have it both ways.”

He stood, looming over her, his face gilded by the firelight. “I love you. And I want you to tell me you don’t feel the same way.”

Her breath caught. “Don’t do this to me.”

“Tell me,” he said, pulling her to her feet.

“I have nothing to say.”

“Liar,” he said, his grip tightening. “Liar!”

“Don’t!” She punched his chest, struggling as he pulled her closer. “You have no right to make demands on me!”

He kissed her, hard, desperately. “Then tell me and get it over with.”

“You—bastard!” She choked on the words. “You know how I feel!” Her fist knocked his chest, falling futilely. “Why make me say it? What good can it do?”

“Say it anyway,” he breathed against her lips. “Just let me hear you—”

“*I love you.*” She was crying now, tears flowing freely. “You know I do, you bastard...” She collapsed in his arms, sobbing.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” he said, his face jubilant, setting them back to the sofa. “We both survived.”

She smiled, swiping away eyes. “Though tomorrow’s another question.”

“We’ll survive anything, you’ll see. I have a way of making things work out.” He stretched out next to her. “Tell me again.”

She eyed him. “Don’t push it, sweetie.”

“Go on.” He kissed her. “Tell me.”

She sighed heavily, pulling her to him. "I love you, I love you, I do, I..."

Leslie couldn't finish, not with his mouth closing so passionately over hers. She felt a sudden lightness overtake her, a feeling so luscious she knew it had to be fleeting, but that hardly mattered right then. She stretched out beneath him, his body blanketing hers and smelling of man and horse and exertion, a mix so intoxicatingly feral she couldn't think past the immediate. She wanted him in her and she wanted him in her now.

"Jack," she whispered, sliding her hand around his neck. "*Jack.*"

She didn't have to go any further. He appeared to know exactly what she meant. He pulled himself off her and they tore at each other's clothes, shirts and jeans sent flying, socks and underwear left in random little heaps around the sofa. In less than a minute, they were naked and Jack was driving his cock inside her.

There was nothing gentle about it; that could wait for later. For now all she needed was the hot, hard affirmation of his affection pounding her, pummeling her, fucking her with such an abandon, it would keep all other imperatives at bay.

She loved him, she did. And he loved her, or so he said. Inside this country cocoon, with the snow falling, the wood crackling, the tree lights twinkling merrily in the corner, Leslie truly believed anything was possible. Whether or not that was true, at the moment she didn't have the strength to care.

Her neck arched, her chest heaved and suddenly she was flying, her hips lifting off the sofa, Jack above her, bearing down. Then all at once his breath caught and she knew he was coming, his hips stilling, his cock emptying itself inside her. When he was through he sat up, holding her close, his face buried in the crook of her neck.

"I'll make it work, Leslie, I will, please believe me."

She closed her eyes, breathing him in, and hoped to God he was right.

* * * *

All the next morning and into the afternoon, they stayed in Jack's bed, only rising to shower and feed each other leftover stew and biscuits, the sunny day casting a blinding reflection over the snow-covered fields. They had watched from the window as the hands let the horses out to pasture, and even though it was snowed over, the animals reveled in their freedom after being in the barn all night, running and kicking and tearing up and down, Chico retreating into the woods for his sedge.

"They're so happy," Leslie said, standing at the window.

"*I'm* so happy," Jack said, and he lifted her up, laying her on her belly on the bed.

She squirmed. "You know, I'm a bit saddle-sore." She peered at him over her shoulder. "And it's not all Miranda's fault."

He arched over her, kissing her bottom. "I can fix that." He spread his hand over her cheeks, kneading and massaging, Leslie mewling with appreciation. Soon he was spreading her legs and devouring her, and when she came he drove himself in.

"You're defeating the...purpose..." she groaned out.

"This is the purpose," he said, driving harder.

Around three, they both knew it was time to go. But there was one more place he wanted to show her. So he took her to his cranberry bogs: large, square manmade ditches flooded in winter to keep the vines submerged and protected, now iced over and covered in snow. Then along the edges of one, she saw at least a dozen very large white birds. "Oh my God, what are they?"

"Trumpet swans," he said. "They come down from Hudson Bay to spend the

winter. They eat the redroot weed out of the bogs, and most of the growers hate them because they can really tear up the vines, but I just can't..." He looked dreamy for a moment. "They sing, you know. They're also called whistling swans." He rolled down the window. "Listen."

She did, hearing a mellow, high-pitched cooing. *Woo-ho, woo-woo, woo-ho...* "It's really strange, but it's so beautiful."

"Like you," Jack said, smiling, kissing her fingers.

He held her hand all the way back to Riverboro. Leslie wondered if she'd ever been happier. By the time they got to her block it was dark, and was Jack ready to turn the corner into the alleyway behind her building when Leslie gripped the dashboard. "Oh my God, look—a cop car!"

Jack peered closer. "Not a cop car. It's from the sheriff's department."

She stared at him. "*Ted*. Something's happened. Oh jeez, keep going."

"No way," he said, slowing down. "I'm coming in with you."

"Are you insane?" She pressed on his knee, accelerating the gas. "Pull around the corner and go down a bit before you drop me off." He tried to argue, but she wasn't having it. A block later, Leslie hopped out. "I'll call you later."

"You'd sure as hell better." He sped off.

Leslie ran down the street, her spike heels slipping on the slush-filled sidewalks, Selma's long jeans dragging to soak her ankles. She turned the corner into her alley, skittering to the sheriff's cruiser, only to find it empty. *That's weird*, she thought. *Then where...?* She flew to the back entrance, taking the steps two at a time to her flat. A light was shining from under the door. She fumbled with the lock, her heart pounding, and

threw it open.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Ted hissed, his wrists and legs in shackles.

Chapter Ten

Leslie looked from where her husband sat to the two sheriff's deputies beside him. "A better question would be what the hell you're doing here."

Ted stretched his athletic legs, his shackles clanking, and nonchalantly flashed his most intimidating smile. "I live here, my pet, remember?"

Six weeks in jail hadn't even nicked the edge of his cockiness. She wanted to hurl him out the window. "And I say you don't."

"You don't have a thing to say about it." He leaned forward, his voice as calm as it was cajoling. "I'll live here until *I* say I don't."

She tossed her purse to the floor, coming at him. "You bastard. Get out of my house!"

"Ma'am," a squat, portly deputy stepped up to block her. "We didn't bring him here so you could air your marital disagreements. You've got one minute to decide if he stays or we take him back to lockup."

"That won't even take one second," she said. "Take him back."

"Oh, you're a riot, Les," Ted said. "Now why don't you say it like you mean it?"

"What's he doing here anyway?" she asked the deputy, ignoring her husband. "He's supposed to be at his parents'."

"Sorry to disrupt your agenda," Ted cut in, "but Mom's been in Arizona at Aunt Hannah's and last night she had a heart attack. Dad flew out this morning."

"Big surprise there," Leslie said. "You gave it to her."

Finally she pushed the right button and Ted flew out of the chair. "Why, you

little—how dare—”

“Sit down,” the other deputy said, shoving him back. He looked to Leslie. “You’re right if you’re thinking this isn’t quite how we do things, but Mr. Parks assured the judge you’d go along with it because of his mother’s situation. He’s on electronic monitoring anyway, so it’s not like you’ll have to be responsible for him. But we do need your consent to leave him here since you share the house.”

Leslie sighed. “Look, it’s not like I’m trying to be heartless about his mother. I feel bad about it, especially since she doesn’t deserve what he’s put her through. But that doesn’t mean I want to inherit her problems, either.” She looked to the deputies. “So I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

The squat deputy nudged Ted. “All right, let’s go.”

He shrugged him off, turning his gaze to Leslie’s. “Relax, buddy, she’s only playing with me. She does enjoy watching me squirm. But it’s only because I’ve been away so long. She doesn’t really mean it.” He shot her a knowing look, his eyes hard enough to drill steel. “Her memory’s a little rusty, too. Isn’t that right, my pet?”

Rusty? No. It wasn’t rusty at all. Selective was more like it. She laughed inwardly, cursing her own naivete. Did she actually believe that if she paid her dues her future would finally become her own? That she’d be able to move on? Start over, but on her terms this time? In an instant her spine iced, the lightness she’d felt earlier dropping like a trap door. That wasn’t naivete; that was stupidity.

Yet she couldn’t help but think, *why now? Why now when I’ve finally...* It was pointless and she knew it. Ted would always have the upper hand.

She turned to the deputy, smiling benignly. “He’s right, Deputy. I was just taken

by surprise. It has been a long time. I just wasn't prepared. I really thought he'd be going to his parents'."

Ted regarded her with regal cordiality. "I would have, Leslie, you know that, but this was an extraordinary circumstance. Thank God I can still call on a few friends. Not *everyone's* abandoned me."

Leslie almost bit her tongue in two. She looked to the deputies. "What do I have to do?"

One of them went to the table and opened a briefcase. "Do you have a landline phone outlet, ma'am?" As he set up the home detention monitor for Ted's ankle bracelet, the other deputy removed his shackles and gave her a release to sign, saying she agreed to have the surveillance equipment in the house. The deputies then gave Ted some forms to sign, but right before they left, they turned to Leslie.

"Are you going to be all right, Mrs. Parks?"

Don't call me that! she wanted to scream, so much harder to take when it was a condition and not a moniker. "I'll be fine," she lied, hurrying toward the bathroom. She closed the door behind her, locking it.

She leaned over the sink, catching her breath, not even realizing how hard it'd been coming until the mirror showed her: her face red, her mouth open, her chest heaving. She bent into it, looking closer, her fingers tracing over her lips. She ran them over her chin and down her neck, past her collarbone, stopping where her heart beat wildly. She splayed her hand across her chest, feeling the steady *thump thump thump*, and closed her eyes.

She could see Jack rising above her, his breath warm on her cheek, his gaze a

green fire, his scent as intrinsically familiar as her own. He grazed her lips with his and kissed her. Her arms flew around his neck; his moist, heated flesh met her own. She never knew until this moment how badly she had wanted him, and it surprised her now to think how quickly *want* had gone to *need*. But wasn't it always like that when you couldn't have something, and that shouldn't have been a surprise, because she knew it going in, and ignored it going out.

Still, she couldn't help but smile at the memory, hugging herself. When was the last time she'd been so happy? How long had it been since she lost herself in someone? When had she ever been that hopeful, looking forward? She gazed into her own expression, her hands gripping the cold porcelain, and fell into herself. She thought she'd left her regrets behind, but she should have known better. He would never understand how far you could go, how deep you could sink. But there was another man who did. Who understood there was no statute of limitations on survival.

A knock came at the door. "Les?"

She looked away from the mirror, grabbing a clip to pull back her hair. "What?"

"The deputies left. Are you okay?"

She tossed him an unseen scowl, turning on the water. "You want to give me a minute here? Could you at least give me that?"

She heard him shuffle away.

Leslie bent into the sink, splashed her face and, soaping a loofah, scrubbed until her skin felt raw. Then she squirted a double amount of paste on her toothbrush and scoured them, spitting and flossing and gargling until her gums nearly bled. *But it's no use, is it?* she thought. She could still taste him, feel him, catch his scent. He was in her

hair, on her clothes, her skin. He was in her and all around her. She closed her eyes, choking back a sob. How could she do it? Where would she ever get the strength? He had come down on her like a tornado. Now, just as quickly, she had to beat a retreat. *It wasn't fair*, she thought. Not that she could think of a time when it ever was.

When she came out of the bathroom, Ted was standing by the window, looking out. A light from the street illuminated his fair hair, almost making him look angelic. "I never really had a chance to explain, did I?" he said. "To talk to you."

Leslie snatched her purse from the floor, craving the sanctuary of her bedroom. "Don't you think it's a little late for that, Ted?"

He turned from the window. "I'm not a monster, you know."

"Then you sure give a great imitation of one." Next to her purse had lain the bundle of her green gown. She winced at the memory of it, shoving it under her arm. "I'm going to sleep. Some people have to work in the morning."

"Yeah," he said, coming toward her. "I heard about your *job*. Pretty good perks, too, I imagine, but then again..." His eyes narrowed. "You do have to work weekends."

She glared at him. "You go to hell."

"Been there. I don't recommend it." He shot her a once-over. "Christ, you got his fingerprints all over you."

"You're crazy."

"So they're saying."

"They're right."

"But you know better." He stepped in front of her, sniffing the air. "Damn, Les. I can smell him on you. What happened to discretion?" He traced his finger down her arm.

“You used to be so good at it.”

Leslie slapped him away. “Only because you gave me a lot of reasons to practice.”

“So what’s your excuse now?” He leaned in, whispering, “Don’t tell me you’re in love.” His lip curled. “How *bourgeois*.”

“Get out of my way,” she said, shoving past him.

Ted caught her arm, reeling her around. “Oh Les, why him? Why Falco?”

She shrugged him off. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh come on!” He clapped a hand to his chest. “Allow me some intelligence. You take a job with the guy’s campaign and every night since, the two of you are AWOL.”

“Now you’re spying on me?”

“When my lawyer couldn’t find you this morning, it didn’t take long to put two and two together. Jesus, Les!” He gaped at her, incredulous. “Think about it—the son of a bitch ruined both our lives and now you’re *fucking* him?”

He really is insane, she thought. “Who I fuck or don’t fuck is none of your business. You gave up that privilege a long time ago.”

“But I never gave up on you. You’re still my wife.”

“Your wife!” She couldn’t believe her ears. “If anyone ruined anyone, you ruined me!”

“Hardly,” he said quietly. “I saved you, and you know it.”

It was more than she could stand. Leslie ran to the bedroom and slammed the door, throwing herself on the bed.

She clutched the coverlet, fabric squishing between her fingers, and closed her

eyes. Would it always be his ace in the hole? Would he ever let her forget? No, he wouldn't, because she couldn't either, no matter how hard she tried.

She had been flying so high six years earlier, at the top of her game. She was the speechwriter for Barry Helder, the CEO of the multimillion dollar pharmaceutical company, Ledbetter/Davis. It had been a bit out of her sphere, coming from the business media, but the CEO had heard about her speechwriting skills, and was willing to pay an outrageous amount for eloquence. They were all set to introduce Zeferol, a hot new drug for Parkinson's disease, at the American Association of Pharmaceutical Chemists conference. A week before, Barry had called Leslie into his office.

"I want your guarantee you won't discuss this speech with anyone. I'll expect from you the strictest of confidence," he'd said. "If our competitors get a whiff of what we're trying, they could beat us to the punch."

Leslie didn't even have to think about it. She'd been putting words into Barry's mouth for more than a year and a half. She knew his preferences, his quirks, even the way his voice dipped and pitched with certain syllables. She knew which words to avoid and which to include, what worked best and what detracted. In some ways, she thought she knew what he liked better than he knew himself. So if he was asking her to hold something close to the chest, it was almost as if he was asking her to keep a secret from herself.

"Of course, Barry. You don't even have to ask. What would you like me to do?"

"Swear it," he said. "Swear what you learn won't go beyond these walls. Until we announce our findings, we can't afford any leaks."

She thought he was being a bit gothic, but it wasn't unheard of for a speech to

remain a bit of a secret until it was given. Especially since the buzz about Zeferol was extraordinary. After years of research and laboratory testing, it was being touted as the breakthrough drug, and Ledbetter/Davis was betting their future—and their stock value—on it. So it was an affirmation she gave easily.

And one she would live to regret.

She had approached the speech in her usual way, politically correct or not. In gathering her data she bypassed the managers to interview the actual clinicians, as was her journalistic habit; she liked to go right to the source. But it was within this process that Leslie began to notice hesitancy on the part of the clinicians, especially since the results they had given her from the testing left gaping holes. When she brought this up to Barry a few days later, he almost seemed flippant.

“Then just write from what I’ve given you,” he had said, waving her off. “I can always fake it.”

That had mystified her, as he knew that wasn’t the way she worked. Part of Leslie’s reputation lay in her attention to detail, her ability to tweak simplicity out of complexity. Yet she acquiesced, ignoring what little data she had managed to gather from the clinicians and writing strictly from Barry’s notes. Two days later he gave her speech at the AAPC conference to instant acclaim. Scientists who had been wary before signed on. Zeferol’s breakthrough qualities—tremors disappear with barely a side effect—seemed to give new hope to the afflicted. The drug was written about in every medical journal, but most of all, Ledbetter/Davis stock went through the roof. Within the month, they went to clinical trials, with more than fifty people signing up to use the experimental Zeferol. Three months later, the first person went into a coma. Two weeks later, the

second. A month after that, a third person died. Immediately after, Barry was slated to make a statement. Leslie had twenty-four hours to attempt damage control. That night she received a phone call from a trial clinician named Leonard Tobias who had worked on Zeferol during its laboratory phase. He sounded quite bitter, saying they had rejected his findings from the animal experiments—that it had caused paralysis in rats and that they instead had manipulated the laboratory results. They tried to drive him out, and he had quit rather than damage his integrity. He assured Leslie he had data to back up his allegations, and he wanted to meet with her discuss it. Leslie’s first impression had been that he was a nutcase, yet all the instincts she’d previously employed as a reporter were on fire. She thanked him and said she needed to do some investigating first, but she’d get back to him. The next morning she had a meeting with Barry.

“Is it possible,” she asked him, “that some data may have been suppressed from the laboratory validation which may have contributed to the clinical’s failure?”

“Highly unlikely.” He stared at her. “Why would you even ask?”

“I’m just trying to cover all the bases. I don’t want you to say one thing, then a week from now, some data comes out of the laboratory that proves Zeferol never should have gone to clinical trials. You didn’t hear anything like this, did you, Barry?”

He looked at her, aghast. “Of course not. Do you actually think I’d put sick people in jeopardy?”

“No, I suppose not.” His shocked expression relieved her. “But neither do I want something coming out of left field. The very fact that someone died is bad enough.”

He came around his desk. “Look, the people who volunteer for these trials are usually the sickest of the lot, and it’s unfortunate—tragic, in fact—when these things

happen. But every one of those patients affected had complications going in, so they also knew they were putting themselves at risk. They all signed waivers and were well aware they were taking a chance. But sometime a chance is also the last, best hope.”

He put his arm over her shoulder as he walked her to the door. “Just promise me you’ll give me your gold, because Leslie?” She had never seen him look more intense. “Without a doubt, this will be the most important speech of your professional life. We need to reassure the stockholders and fast. I think you’re the best there is, but I need to deliver a confirmation that will completely remove any doubt from their minds about Zeferol’s safety. The future of Ledbetter/Davis is at stake. Are you up to it?”

Was she up to it... Leslie had never backed down from a challenge, or a dare. “Of course I am,” she had said.

The next morning, Barry Helderer gave possibly the best speech of Leslie’s career. The stockholders were ecstatically reassured. The next day she received an e-mail with a Word attachment from L. Tobias. She promptly deleted it.

Two weeks later, she got another strange phone call. “Ted Parks,” he said, “from the Hudson County Prosecutor’s office. Do you have a minute, Miss Czaski?”

The hairs on the back of her neck went up.” What do you want with me?”

She could hear him shuffling through some papers. “Czaski...that’s Polish, isn’t it? But ‘Leslie’ isn’t. Rather an odd combination, don’t you think?”

Rather an odd man, she thought. “Actually, it’s Leokadia. Leslie’s a little easier to say. Mr. Parks, what can I do for you?”

“Leslie, I would like to take you to lunch.”

Very odd. “Now, why would you want to do that?”

“Because it would very much be in your interest.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong.” She palmed her chest. *Then why is my pulse off the charts?*

“No one says you have. Though Leonard Tobias may see it differently.”

She swallowed. Hard. “Where should I meet you?”

An hour later she’d walked into a busy deli on the other side of town. It was full of college kids and very noisy, every booth full. In the corner Leslie saw a man rise, tall and lanky like a runner. She was quite certain she had never met him before, yet he waved her over. She snaked through the crowd to him.

“Leslie,” he said, “glad you could make it. I’m Ted Parks.”

She noticed he had a beautiful smile. “Well, I’m here,” she said, sliding into the booth opposite him. “Mind if you tell me right away what this is about? I’m on my lunch and it took fifteen minutes to get here.”

“Which is why I ordered. They have a great chicken salad.” He leaned in. “You do like chicken salad, I hope? I took a shot.”

“I love chicken salad.” Although she hadn’t had it in months. Still, he seemed glad he’d chosen well. She told herself if she hadn’t been so nervous she would’ve wondered if he was single. She slid a pickle from a plateful on the table and nipped it. “Anyway...”

“Half sours,” he said, pointing to the plate. “Okay, I’ll cut to the chase. A Dr. Leonard Tobias contacted me a few months back. Ranted on about Ledbetter/Davis, saying he had been a clinician there, but he left because he said the company was out to kill people. I didn’t take him too seriously. He seemed a bit of a mad scientist to me.

Then a couple of weeks ago he came back, ranting again, saying this time you *are* killing people. This time he mentions you.”

“Me!” Her heart kicked up a notch. “What did he say?”

“He said he sent you data the company’s experimental drug was dangerous, that it should’ve never gone to clinical trials. He said that data would back up his claims, said you were going to do some research and get back to him. Then the next morning, your boss gave a brilliant speech why Zeferol deserves to get FDA approval. He then sent you evidence to the contrary, but according to Tobias, you chose to sit on that information.”

“But I never saw any.”

“He said he sent you a Word file with the proof.”

“I remember getting something from a L. Tobias, but I deleted it.”

“Now, why would you do that?”

Leslie tossed her pickle back to the plate. “Oh, come on! You admitted it yourself. I thought he was crazy, too.”

He retrieved her pickle, took a bit, tossed it back. “And now that crazy man is dead. Found him hanged yesterday morning. Suicide.”

Leslie slumped back in the booth, all the air knocked out of her. “Jesus.” She looked at him, resigned. “So what now? You’re going to have me arrested?”

He glanced to the waitress setting their lunch to the table. “Now who’s crazy? I’m buying you a chicken salad.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said, pushing the plate away.

Ted pushed his plate aside as well. “Leslie, I did not have you come here to set you up. I had you come so you would know.”

“Yeah, I’m sure the arresting part will come after the investigation. They’ll say I was suppressing evidence, which I suppose I was.” She shook her head tightly. “Oh God, I should’ve gone to Barry as soon as I found out!”

“So he could do what? Announce the findings and make the stock drop like a stone? Fat chance. They would’ve driven you out, too. But you are right about one thing. They’ll be an investigation, and they’ll might even be an arrest, but it won’t be you, and I’ll tell you why.” He took a bite of the sandwich, his eyes rolling in bliss. “Unless you shared your findings with anyone, no one knows about the mad doctor except me and you.” He pushed her plate forward. “And I’m not telling anyone.”

She was mystified. “But why?”

“There’s legal and there’s ethical, and you’re innocent of one and guilty of the other. But only you can figure that one out. Then there’s just plain prejudice, and you, my fine chicken-salad eater...” He nudged the plate closer. “Have a definite prejudice against mad doctors.”

“I’m not taking this lightly, you know. You have no idea how bad I feel.”

“It’s just hunger. Eat.”

“I can’t eat!” She wanted to throw the plate against the wall. She leaned into the fair-haired man as he idly chewed his sandwich. “Tobias committed suicide because I never did anything with what he sent me, and now more people are going die because of it. And you want me to eat a chicken salad sandwich? *Fuck* your goddamned sandwich!”

His eyes flared, and he grinned with delight. “Good Lord, I do believe I’m going to have to marry you. You’re one fiery woman.”

She stabbed her finger at him, outraged. “You’re really going to see fire in a

minute when I—”

He grabbed her finger, curling his hand around it as he lowered it to the table. “Leslie, hopefully no one else is going to die because of this. We found the data in his notes. In fact, he directed us to it. There’ll be an investigation and probably a hefty lawsuit. Trust me, Dr. Leonard Tobias is finally having his say, with or without you.”

“And you won’t say anything?”

His hand had tightened around hers. “It’ll always be our little secret.”

* * * *

Six years later, he was still holding that sword of Damocles over her. Leslie rolled from the bed. *It’ll never end, will it?* Then from the floor she heard a buzz from her purse; her phone was vibrating. She lunged for it, hand diving inside. When she lit the face, her breath caught.

She answered it. “*Jack.*”

First a huff. “He’s there, isn’t he?”

“Yes. His mother had a heart attack in Arizona, and his father flew out this morning, so they brought him here. He’s under house arrest with an ankle monitor.”

“You agreed?” He sounded angry. “Why would you do that?”

“What did you want me to do? Say no? It’s his house, too. I haven’t even filed for divorce yet. What kind of excuse was I supposed to give them?”

“Jesus Christ. You all right?”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry. I’m used to him.”

“I don’t want you to stay there. He’s crazy.”

“Not so crazy I can’t handle it.”

“Son of a bitch—if he touches you—”

“He won’t. Jack, really, I’ll be fine. And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be at the office by eight. If it means canceling all my appointments, I won’t leave until I see you.”

“I’ll be there, don’t worry.”

“Right. Like that’s not all I’m going to do tonight. Lock the door. And Leslie?”

“Yes...?”

“I love you.” He rang off.

And that was the worst part, because she loved him, too. She tossed her phone to her purse and fell back to the bed, her vision clouding. And that was why it was going to be so damned hard to tell him she could never see him again.

Chapter Eleven

When Leslie awoke it was still dark, yet light enough for her to see Ted lying opposite her on the bed.

She bolted upright, kicking his leg. “Hey, what the hell! Get up!”

He started, his eyes snapping open. “What...?”

Good thing she was still in her clothes. Not that it mattered. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

He yawned, pushing himself up against the headboard. “Obviously not sleeping anymore.” He yawned again. “Jesus, Les, you’re one hell of an alarm clock.”

“And you have one hell of a nerve.” She pulled the coverlet around her. “*Out.*”

He scratched his chest through his T-shirt. “You know, we never got a chance to talk last night.”

“And we’re not going to now. *Out.*”

“We used to do a lot of talking here.”

“You blew your chance to talk in my bed a long time ago.” She jumped from it, throwing her robe around her. “Now get out.”

“That I’ll regret until the day I die.” He drew his knees up slinging his arms over them. “Les, I’m so, so sorry.”

She huffed, shaking her head. “You’re so full of shit.”

“Not this time, please believe me.” He looked at her, and if Leslie hadn’t known better, she would’ve sworn he was being sincere. “These past weeks I’ve had a lot of time to think about all the crap I’ve put you through, and it hasn’t made me feel too good

about myself, I can assure you.”

“Aw, poor thing.” She threw open the curtains, staring down into the alleyway.

“Is baby’s little psyche a bit singed?”

“Don’t laugh. I want to make it right with you.” He threw his legs over the bed, coming toward her. “I’ve acted like an asshole, and I can’t blame you if you hate me.”

“Good. I’m so relieved. Now I can go on hating you completely without guilt.”

“I don’t think you get what I’m saying. I want to start over, start fresh. Leslie,” he said, grasping her shoulders. “I still love you. I always have.” Then he took her face between his hands and kissed her.

It was the shock of it at first that kept her from reacting. When had he last kissed her—a year ago? Maybe more? Maybe her mental files couldn’t—didn’t—want to do the math, admit her marriage had been loveless a long time before that. But it didn’t take her long to regain her senses and she twisted away, pushing him from her.

“You bastard. Get the hell out of here!”

He grabbed her arms and shoved her against the wall, his body pressing against hers. “I’m still your husband, you know.”

“So what does that mean?” She could feel his erection steadily hardening.

“You’re going to rape me, too? You’ve already got the blackmail part down.”

He jumped back, like burned. “I never raped anyone.”

“I think Gina Bardone sees it differently.”

Leslie admitted he at least had the grace—however twisted—to seem embarrassed. “That was the stupidest thing I ever did. It was all ego. A pissing contest to impress the boys, like I was thirteen years old. But you have to believe me. I never raped

her. It was consensual. A stupid and an unforgivable infidelity to our marriage, but really, Les, think about it. Do you actually think high and mighty Gina Bardone would let me get away with rape?"

"People will do a lot of stupid things when they think they have no choice. Just look at us. We were a train wreck from the start, and we're even a bigger one now." She reached under her bed and brought out a knapsack. "You helped me once, Ted, and for a time, I do believe I loved you. But that's all gone now. You can keep everything. It's really all yours, anyway. I'm leaving."

He leaned over the bed. "And where you going to go? To Jack?" He laughed. "Be reasonable, Les. The man's running for governor and you're a scandal on the hoof. He had his good fuck, and now he probably doesn't even remember your name."

"I'm not going to anyone, Ted. This time I'm getting back to basics. This time it's all about me." She shoved her boots on, grabbed her pack and purse and left for the bathroom.

He was waiting for her when she came out. "I won't give you a divorce. You'll have to fight me for it."

"That won't be hard," she said, slipping on her coat, draping herself in laptop, purse and pack. "If there's a divorce equivalent of a mercy killing, I'm sure any judge in the county will take pity." She went to the door. "Goodbye, Ted. Have an interesting life." She fled down the stairs.

When Leslie hit the sidewalk, the lightness returned, however altered. She had no money, no place to live, and soon, no job. But even so, in a way, that should have cheered her. She always found there was nothing like a clean slate to clear away the cobwebs, and

she would've welcomed it if it hadn't been for the one thing.

There was Jack to consider; how would she ever say goodbye? Even though she came to him knowing one day she'd have to.

It was early, not quite six thirty, the morning still and damp and cold. Too early to go to the office, too early to call Jack, although she knew if she did he would answer immediately. She thought maybe she ought to have taken her car, but she felt a powerful urge to walk, to engage in the physical act of moving, however much she resembled a pack mule. She crossed street after slushy street, her cheeks frosted but her body warming, going over her options, making plans. Soon she found herself at a corner in front of Serious Joe, the dining room still dark, suddenly wanting her friend very badly. Pam Flynn—now Carmelli. She longed to talk to her, pour her heart out. She smiled. Have her thwack her upside the head with a good dose of common sense. But Pam had a new life now. Actually, three. There was no place for Leslie in any of it.

The door opened. "What are you doing hanging our on street corners?"

She looked to the big man, his apron covered in splashes of color. "Hi, Roark."

"Going somewhere?" he said, his massive biceps bulging as he crossed his arms in front of him.

"Running away, more like it." She hefted her slipping backpack. "You got a cup of joe for me?"

"Always." He stepped back. "Come on in." He slipped her backpack from her shoulder, kissing the top of her head as they walked toward the counter. "You look like hell, Leslie. That bastard messing with you again?"

They dropped her gear to a chair and Leslie took a seat as Roark fixed her a tall

one. "He moved back in last night."

Roark looked up from the counter, incredulous. "*No*. The balls!"

She explained the whole mess, even down to Ted kissing her, though deliberately avoiding any mention of her involvement with Jack. "Let Ted keep it all. I don't want anything. So I just took what I could carry and I left. I'm not going back."

"So where you off to now?"

"I have no idea." She took the last bite of still-warm muffin, and propped her chin in her hand. "But enough about me. How's Pam? How're the babies?"

He seemed to glow with happiness. "Pam's great. She came home on Saturday. And the babies." He looked away, smiling dreamily. "I swear to God, I think they grow a pound every day. They eat like little vacuum cleaners. Between the two of us, we can barely feed them fast enough."

It felt good to talk about something else, at least momentarily. "Then why aren't you home with them now?"

Roark glowered at her. "The grandmothers arrived yesterday. That's even too much Irish for me. I told her I'd be down here, taking my frustrations out on a nice, simple focaccia. They told me not to come home unless I brought soda bread. I give up. Hey, you should go see her."

"I'm sure the last thing she needs is a visit from me."

"It's the best thing that could happen to her. They're driving her crazy, too, Hey! I know. Why don't you stay until you figure out what you're doing? You can't go home with that asshole still there, and I won't have you walking the streets." He slipped his phone from his pocket. "Let me call Pam and tell her you'll be right over."

“Roark, no, please don’t.” Leslie caught his arm, pulling it down. “I don’t want to bother her—and don’t say I wouldn’t be. I would. And forgive me, but...” She choked back a sob, feeling ridiculous. “I just couldn’t handle all that happiness right now.”

Roark sighed, covering Leslie’s hand with his. “Leslie, listen to me. It’ll get better, it will. I’m telling you this from personal experience. Three years ago, I was like the walking dead. A cloud of guilt hanging over me, burned out from watching people die, my wife divorcing me. But if you put your mind to it, you’ll find out you have a wonderful power to reinvent yourself, and I was just desperate enough to try.” He threw out his hands. “Now look at me. If someone were to tell me back then I’d be married again with three kids and my own business, I would’ve told them they’re nuts. Yet here I am.” He squeezed her hand. “You just got to keep the faith, Leslie. I’m telling you, anything that’s worth it always works out.”

Then a buzzer went off in the back. He rose. “That’s a delivery. This shouldn’t take long. We have a few minutes until we open, so *don’t move*.”

She said, “Okay,” really knowing it was the perfect time to leave. Especially since the help was beginning to shuffle in. After he disappeared into the back room, she gathered her things, leaving a five on the table. Then, just as a barista locked the door behind her, she noticed a man getting out of an old car. He looked vaguely familiar.

As she must have to him. “Leslie,” he said, not as question.

He was tall and solidly built, with short blond hair and eyes an icy blue. He wore a suit and his overcoat was opened, like he only put it on it because he was supposed to and didn’t give a damn about the weather. Then all at once recognition clicked. *Gina Bardone’s Doug Welland. The Camden cop who investigated Ted and had him arrested.*

And who, essentially, was the reason she was now out on the curb.

She bristled, tossing him a quick hello before she hurried toward the sidewalk.

“Leslie,” he called, “hold on.”

She froze. It was the last thing she wanted to do. But as she turned toward the man towering over her, she was well aware Doug Welland wasn’t a man you easily said no to. “Hello, Doug. How are you?”

He gave her a quick assessment. “Better than you, I’m thinking. You know, I’ve been meaning to talk to you. Been wanting to say how sorry I am.”

That startled her. “For what?”

“For what? For fucking your life!” Then he demurred. “Excuse the French.”

Leslie almost laughed. She hadn’t realized there were still men left in the world begging pardon for their Gallic outbursts. “You didn’t fuck my life. The wheels were already in motion long before you arrived. Plus the way I heard it, you were caught on the tracks just like I was.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking away. “Yeah, maybe.” Then he smiled. “So Gina tells me you’re working for Jack Falco’s campaign?”

Should she tell him the truth? *No. Better to deflect.* “Now it’s my turn to apologize. I was pretty rude to Gina the last time I saw her. She was only trying to help me, and I was a real bitch.”

“It all worked out in the end, though.”

“Oh yeah, sure.” Leslie realized she had answered a little too quickly. And Doug apparently picked up on it

“Leslie, look.” He shifted his hip. “I was a bit of a bastard to Jack when I first

met him. Kind of made me nuts how he was always after Gina, and it didn't even matter she was his chief-of-staff. I was just thinking he had a thing for her. Of course I was wrong." He looked at her directly. "Jack's a good man. One of the best out there. You could do a hell of a lot worse."

She wasn't sure whether he was referring to Jack as boss or Jack as lover, and right then she didn't want to examine it. "I suppose I could. Well, Doug, nice seeing you again. Say hello to Gina for me."

"You got it. Say." He tilted his head toward his ancient car. "You need a ride?"

"No. I haven't got far to walk. Take care." She turned the corner, not looking back.

She got to the campaign headquarters a little past seven fifteen. It was still empty and quiet, and although she'd only actually worked there a couple of days, she was still going to miss it. Someone had put up a Christmas tree and menorah and there was fake holly strewn across the back offices and along the walls, which made her think of Jack's offer to spend the holidays with him, and that almost made her cry. Now where she'd spend Christmas seemed inconsequential against the fact she had no idea where she'd be spending the night.

And wherever she'd be spending either, she'd be spending them alone.

Leslie went to her office, brushing aside the holly to open the door. On her desk was a note from Mallory: *NEED your cell number!! Get guest list for next week's town meeting Paramus. Need agenda for Jack's visit to Veteran's hospital Friday. Get ????'s for Jessup blog interview Wed. OUT OF COFFEE!!!! We're having dinner at Jester's tonight w/Lee; make rez. Must convince Jack to Twitter!*

It was a shame, really. She'd hardly gotten to know Mallory, and now she'd have to tell her she was quitting. She looked around her small office. Funny how little time she had spent here, yet already it felt like home. But wasn't that the way of the whole affair? All had come at her like a tornado, but it all had felt so right. How often did that happen? How often did things just *fit*? But somehow, here, they did. She wrote Mallory a quick note, tendering her resignation, sealing it in an envelope before she went to place it on her desk. When she got back to her office, Jack was standing in it. "Jack!"

He turned, looking rushed and pale and worried, and lifted her into his arms. "Jesus, I almost went crazy."

Leslie threw her arms around his neck and he kissed her thoroughly, the sensation so heady a warm rush zipped through her body. Until that moment she hadn't realized how tightly she'd been wound until she began to relax in his arms. "I'm all right. Really."

"Are you?" He glanced down at her. "You still have on Selma's clothes!"

"I kind of left in a hurry."

"Why?"

She lowered herself to the floor. "Because I kind of...left."

His eyes widened, taking in her meaning. "Oh, *good*! Wonderful, in fact. I'll get some keys made this afternoon and you can go back to the farm. If you like, I can get one of my domestic help to go back for your things. As a matter of fact, we probably should do that anyway. The less that bastard has a chance—"

"Don't worry, I'm not going back." She turned away from him, placing her hands on the desk. "But I can't go back to the farm, either."

"Why not? It's a quarter mile off the road, and completely private. The staff is

more than discreet. You won't have anything to worry about."

"No, but you will. I can't do that to you." It would take all the strength she had in her to say what she needed to say next. She took a deep breath. "Jack, we both knew right from the start this thing couldn't last. It'd be naive of us—"

"No." He spun her around. "Don't even think it."

"But I have to. And so do you." She picked up her purse, reaching for her pack and laptop. "I've already left Mallory my letter of resignation."

"No!" He grabbed her, hoisting her atop the desk. "I won't hear it. You can't quit. You just can't." He slipped her purse from her arm, holding her head between his hands. "I know now I can't make it through this thing without you. I'll do whatever it takes but you can *not* leave me."

She grasped his wrists. "And what will that be, Jack? Are you willing to tell the world you're having an affair with a married woman? A woman whose husband threatened to kill your assistant? A woman who's so without integrity she let people die rather than get involved?"

His hands slid from her. "What are you talking about?"

"Remember that Ledbetter/Davis scandal about six years ago? The one that nearly ruined the company? The one involving that Parkinson's drug?"

He thought a moment. "Yes. Three people died before they finally pulled it."

"And it inspired new FDA regulations regarding testing." She clenched her eyes, still cringing from the memory. "Before it went to testing, a clinician approached me about the data being tampered with. He thought he could trust me because of my journalistic background, but I ignored him and did nothing. A few weeks later the

clinician ended up killing himself. There was only one of other person in the world who knew about that connection.”

“Let me guess,” he said flatly. “Ted.”

“He was working for the prosecutor’s office then. He couldn’t have arrested me, I didn’t do anything illegal, but he realized all too well the ethical implications. It was easier for me to see him as some kind of moral savior than the master manipulator he was. I fell for it, and so did Gina, but she was smart enough to finally call him on it. Now it’s too late for my redemption. So it’s a crime I’m damned to carry with me.”

“Oh come on, Leslie. Now you’re just being dramatic.” He raked his hair back, looking at her. “It was a long time ago. People have short memories.”

“Not in this business and you know it. Face it, Jack. I’m political poison. If anyone were ever to find out about us, your career would be over.”

His eyes darkened. “Then no one ever will.”

“But that’s ridiculous. You can’t live like that and it isn’t fair to me. I’ve been walking around with this moral baggage too long, and I won’t do it anymore.”

He pulled her to him. “And I’m saying I won’t give you up.” Again he took her head between her hands. “I can’t and I won’t.” He kissed her.

But it was so much more than a simple kiss. He tilted her head up to his and when his mouth opened hers, he claimed her, Leslie reeling from his possession right down to her toes. His tongue reached inside her mouth, sweeping and searching, his arms closing around her tighter as she snaked her hands beneath his jacket, feeling his body hardening against her. She felt an electricity wash through, a need so basic she nearly fell to her knees, and it wasn’t a moment more before he was slipping her coat from her and she was

kicking off her boots. Their lips were still locked when he pushed her back onto the desk. In an instant he had pulled her jeans and panties from her, and he was kneeling before her, slowly spreading her legs.

She knew she shouldn't allow it, as what good could it do to prolong the inevitable, but she couldn't help herself; she ached for him. When he drew his hands up her thighs, when she felt herself go wet in anticipation, when his thumbs met those first moist folds and her clit throbbed almost painfully, she didn't care what was right or wrong or even decent anymore. She just wanted his mouth on her and then it was, his tongue licking and tracing, circling the periphery, teasing her with ruthless efficiency, everywhere and anywhere except for the exact location where she longed, craved, *had to have him be*. She stabbed her fingers into his hair, yanking, pulling.

"Stop it, Jack..." she moaned, her legs thrown over his shoulders, his hands burning her thighs. She writhed atop the desk as he circled and teased, one finger slowly sliding into her sodden, swollen channel. His other fingers roamed, explored, grasping her bottom and spreading her, her body feeling open and not her own, and at the discretion of the man staking his claim before her.

"Do you like that?" he whispered, drawing his finger in and out, slowly, painfully, exquisitely. He arched up and traced his tongue around the wiry thatch of blond hair and up her skin to around her navel, where he dove in for a taste and Leslie nearly jumped, groaning softly before he retreated, down, down, her clit throbbing now, so engorged it was like a too-ripe fruit ready to burst from its skin. His tongue circled it, once, twice, and when he finally licked it Leslie jolted against his mouth, her bottom lifting off the desk. He sucked it back, his tongue flicking over and over and over again.

She threw back her head and screamed.

He laughed. "Go ahead. As if anyone will hear you."

So she did. And she would've have kept on doing it if the pleasure didn't steal her breath away. It coursed through her like manic, maverick waves, again and again, so mind-numbingly perfect she had thought she had reached the orgasmic epitome. Then she heard his zipper fall and he leaned over her and suddenly she felt herself widening. She pushed herself up and saw his cock pushing into her, so massive and insistent she thought she was imagining things.

He looked down on her, his eyes heavy and lidded. "I've never wanted you more, Leslie, because I've never needed you more." One more thrust and he was inside her, fully, deeply, and she never felt more stretched. More filled. More *fulfilled*. She reached up and pulled his mouth to hers and she kissed him, his lips never sweeter, his eyes like emeralds, never feeling more in love.

"I love you," he whispered, reading her mind. "Believe me when I say it. I do." He grazed his lips over hers and then pushing up her shirt, unsnapped her bra, her breasts tumbling out. He took a nipple in his mouth and sucked, sucked hard, his tongue tracing the areola before he kissed her just below it, leaving a mark. Then another, then across to her other breast to leave two more. Leslie writhed beneath him as he straightened up and pushed her knees back, bearing down.

She tossed her head to the side, the feeling of his skin slapping hers exquisite. Her whole body felt enflamed, expectant, the fullness inside her expanding with each thrust. She could feel herself rising again, even higher this time, and she knew it wouldn't be long before he'd lose control—and she would, too. As she felt the current spreading, as

her breath started coming as hard as his, she had the minimum presence of mind to pant out, “Oh God, oh Jack, I’m not...I’m not...”

“What...?” he breathed, pounding harder, faster.

“I’m not...ready,” she finally said.

He looked down on her, his gaze soft, full of love, yet passionately transfixed, long past the point of no return. Seeing him like this, so intent, so drunk on her, was enough to send her spiraling. Then she was, going off, coming and coming and coming, more intensely than before, if that was possible. She raised up, gripped his arms on either side of her and her hips began to buck, and it was right then he slammed her, harder and more powerfully than ever before. Suddenly he pulled out and he was letting loose, searing jets of his release shooting to her breasts, his head thrown back in a silent shriek. Leslie groaned, each jet hitting her like a hot brand, and she yanked his head down to hers. He kissed her hard, tasting blood, his cock between them, still pulsing. When he broke their kiss, she could see his forehead was beaded and he was panting, yet smiling with a satiety that left her breathless.

“Holy fucking shit...” he wheezed out, slumping against her.

“Oh no.” She laughed. “I think we just ruined your shirt.”

“And tie.” Slowly he raised up, looking between them.

Leslie fingered his Windsor knot. “May I have them as souvenirs? I’d like to trot them out when you’re president.”

“Ha, ha,” he said, straightening up. “Isn’t it lucky I keep extras in Mallory’s office?” He zipped up, throwing off his jacket, shirt and tie.” Here, catch,” he said, tossing his shirt at her bare belly. “Might as well use it for all it’s worth.”

After he kissed her and retreated to Mallory's office, she pulled up her jeans and righted herself. She stared at his shirt and tie, dotted with their lovemaking, and thought of their joking, as funny as it had been telling. They could be as comical as they wanted, but it only underscored the reality: what was between them, no matter how wonderful or how much in love they were, it would always be illicit. He was too good a man to harbor secrets. And she was tired of dragging around hers. She gathered up his tie and shirt and rolling them into a ball, stuffed it into his briefcase. When he returned—new shirt, new tie, looking as crisp as morning—she was just slipping into her coat.

“Where are you going?” he said, pulling on his jacket.

She could feel her heart slowly working its way up her throat. “That was wonderful, Jack, but nothing's changed. I'm still leaving.”

He stared at her. “You're kidding, right?”

She pulled on her backpack, her laptop. “I would never kid about something this serious,” she said, slinging her purse over her arm.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Leslie, please don't leave. Tell me where you're going.”

She thought a moment. “You know? I'm not sure. That's kind of exciting, I guess.” She could feel herself shaking under his grasp. “And scary.”

“Leslie, please.” His hands tightened. “Don't go. We'll work something out.”

They heard voices, both turning toward them. At the front door was Mallory, calling to someone just pulling to the curb.

“I'd better go,” Leslie said. “I really don't want to make a scene. Especially since Mallory can be quite intimidating.”

“The hell with Mallory,” he said, panicked. “Don’t go. Please. You told me you loved me.”

She looked to Jack, her vision blurring. “I do. I think I always will. But we always knew this was never going to work, didn’t we?” She could see an older man getting out of the car. “Oh my God, that’s Senator Thornson.”

Jack looked to the window. “Holy Christ.” He looked back to her. “Leslie.” He gripped her again, tighter this time. “You can’t leave. I won’t let you. It’s crazy to think we can just walk away from each other.”

Mallory stuck her key in the lock. Leslie had seconds left. “This has been the best week of my life. I’ll never forget you.” He stared at her, shocked into silence, as Leslie pushed up, pecking him on the lips. “Goodbye.”

The lights went on; Jack turned. Mallory and the senator stepped inside. “Congressman, good morning!” she called. “Guess who’s coming with us today?”

Jack whirled around, looking behind him.

She was gone.

Chapter Twelve

“Because it’s not only the future anymore. It’s a mandate. Thank you, and good morning.”

Jack closed his folder, stepping back from the podium, the applause as enthusiastic as it had been for so many of his speeches before. Yet when he took his seat on the stage among the members of the forum, he couldn’t ignore how hollow he had sounded. How hollow he felt inside.

He stared out into the audience, still reeling. They had only been together for a few days, but how quickly he had gotten used to her. He half expected to look over and see her waiting in the wings: her hair pinned up so businesslike, her mouth tight with concentration, her four-inch heels anchoring her in place. But if he closed his eyes he could just as clearly imagine her hair fanned across his pillow, her mouth sighing in release, her spike heels digging into the mattress on either side of them. Both images were so powerful he ached at the remembrance. He ached at her scent still on his skin, his clothes, in the very air he breathed.

He shook his head tightly, wanting to rage, scream. How could she do this to him? Didn’t she believe him when he said he loved her? It was the hardest thing he ever did, restraining himself from running off the stage and jumping in his car to go find her. But where would he go? He had yet to learn her haunts. He’d only had time enough to find out he was very much in love with her—and so very lost without her.

Somehow, he turned his attention to the next speaker approaching the podium. Senator Thornson. He was an old man now, had always been a good friend of the family.

Yet even well into his eighties he was still vibrant, still robust, still one of the greatest lawmakers Jack had ever known. He had worked on much of the groundbreaking legislation of his time: civil rights, voter registration, environmental control, was still on all the most powerful committees, finance, foreign relations, energy. Even more than his own family, Senator Rich Thornson had been Jack's inspiration to enter politics, because he was breathing proof that government could actually work *for* the people, that it could be so much more than juicy subcontracts, prophylactic wars or bridges to nowhere. He had made Jack believe that he alone could make a difference.

Jack recalled the semester he had spent as a Senate page when he was sixteen. He remembered his first morning, being summoned to Senator Thornson's office. He had been very excited, practically running through the Hart Building. The secretary looked up and smiled.

"Well," she said, "you must be John Falco."

He tried to affect his most authoritative stance. "Yes. I'm here to see the Senator."

"Really," she said dryly. "Have a seat."

"But he specifically wanted to see me."

Her brow arched. "Then you may take the *specific* seat...right over there."

The one next to the trash, he noticed. But he took it. And waited And jittered.

Nearly an hour and half later, he was called into Senator Thornson's office.

"Jack!" the senator cried, his hand extended. "Well! how goes your first day?"

Jack took the burly man's hand, shaking it with somewhat less eagerness. "So far it's consisted of sitting in your waiting area for an hour and a half. I was hoping it'd be a little more exciting than that."

The man crossed his arms in front of him, considering that statement. “Sit down, Jack.” He did, somewhat reluctantly.

The Senator held up a thick fold of papers. “Do you know what this is?”

Jack regarded it for a moment. “I imagine it’s something to do with legislation.”

“Then you imagine correctly, but it’s a bit more than that.” He tossed it to the desk and sat back. “This little bundle of papers is Senate Bill number 8742-A, a bill proposing a ban on industrial waste into the Delaware Bay. In the hour and a half you were cooling your heels, I was on the phone working six senators, and exactly one minute ago, I got an assurance on the tipping vote. So you see, Jack, you weren’t just spending your time idly. You were part of the process, because now you’re going to take that bill down to the desk in preparation for a floor vote.”

Jack took the bill, a bit in awe. *Yet...* “Sorry, sir.” He stood. “Thank you, sir.”

He leaned forward. “I sense hesitation, young man. Speak frankly, please.”

Jack knew better than to be reticent with the Senator. “I appreciate being part of the process, sir, but I was just thinking there has to be a better way to be a part of it than wasting an hour and a half in your waiting room.”

The older man nodded. “Good point, Jack. Find it hard to sit still for long?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “You have no idea. I’d rather be doing something.”

He had pondered that a moment. “Well, I can see you’re a man of action. And that’s an admirable quality, because thinking on your feet has its place as well. But sometimes a great deal can be accomplished by just sitting still and taking the time to think things through. By looking to the long term and not for just the here and now. That bill in your hand is a terrific example. Dumping into the Bay solves an immediate

problem for the factory, but it's too one-sided, as most old technologies are. It only creates a mess for the public at large. New technology tells us we have to look at the bigger picture to find a solution. In this case, it's scrubbers and a purification system. For you, it may be something else. But you'll never know unless you concentrate on the long term and not just the present. If you do, maybe you'll find you can solve almost anything."

The audience began to applaud, everyone rising to their feet, and Jack came out of his reverie to stand as well, thinking of that day more than twenty-five years earlier. He looked at the Senator, shaking hands, waving from the podium. Maybe the old ideas just didn't apply anymore. Maybe they were never destined to. There had to be a solution. He just had to take some time, and think about the long term.

* * * *

"More coffee?" said Mallory, tipping the carafe over Lee's cup.

"Hell, yeah," he said, pushing up his shirtsleeves. "I need all the go I can get." He cocked a brow. "The party's continuing after I leave your lovely home."

Mallory laughed. "I don't know how you do it," she said, pouring the last of it. "Do you ever sleep?" She looked at Jack. "Do you have any idea what's up with this guy, Congressman?"

But he'd only been half listening. "What?"

Mallory set the carafe in the sink and returned to her kitchen table. "Hey, Jack," she said softly, "how goes it?"

"Not very well," he said flatly.

She patted his hand. "I never expected it either. I'm so sorry."

He smiled weakly. “May I ask you a personal question?”

She seemed a bit surprised, but said, “Sure. Anything.”

“Thanks.” He thought a few moments, then said, “Do you ever regret getting married and having a child? Being in this business, I mean.”

“No,” she said quickly, “not for one moment. Now, this might not work for everyone, but I don’t think I’d be able to do it without them. They keep my head on straight. You know they way I could be. I’d be a monster if it weren’t for them.”

“Even more than you are right now?” Lee said. He ducked a potholder Mallory flung at him. “Now, I, on the other hand, believe in being proactive. By my staying single, I get to spread the joy around—”

“Instead of inflicting it on a single poor soul,” Mallory finished. “But not everyone works that way.”

“True,” agreed Lee. “But all joking aside, it’s tough to keep a decent marriage in politics. Look how many divorces there are.”

“Isn’t it funny, though, they’re mostly among the Republicans? The Dems cheat but they still stay together. Look at Hillary and Bill. John and Elizabeth.”

Lee snorted. “Also because Dems don’t have to marry ’em to get laid.” Mallory shot him a filthy look. “Oops. Poor taste. My bad.”

She shook her head. “You’re such an idiot.”

“Oh knock it off,” Jack said. “I’m way past kid gloves. If you two can’t be honest with me, who can?”

“Then marry her,” Mallory said.

“Are you insane?” Lee countered. “Think of the mutual benefits. Sorry, but I

don't see any."

"He loves her," said Mallory.

"But that's not enough," said Lee.

"If he ever wants to make it to the big show, he needs to get married."

"Bullshit. James Buchanan never married."

"And he is consistently ranked as one of the worst presidents ever."

"I'm sure that had nothing to do with him being single."

"Perhaps," said Mallory, "but it's the only thing he's really remembered for. Even Obama has been quoted saying having his family around makes him a better president. They keep him grounded and focused."

"But look at his wife," said Lee. "She's smart, accomplished, and personable. Their kids are a photographer's dream. She comes from a stable family, and together they *are* a stable family. They're nothing but pluses."

Jack glared at him, his eyes narrowing. "Cut to the chase."

Mallory winced at Lee. "Don't pay any attention to him. Character speaks for itself. And she never did anything wrong. She was a victim, remember?"

"You are known by the company you keep," Lee said. "Or shall we call Imelda Marcos and Evita victims, too?"

"And Dolley Madison invented ice cream. I don't get your point."

"How about Edith Wilson, then? *Anyway...*" Lee shifted in his chair. "My point is a political life is a public one. There's no sneaking Marilyn Monroe through the back door anymore. There's no more 'I'm a gay American,' and having it be a shocker. Unless she's willing to air everything out in the open, she'll never have a chance, because

eventually someone will do it for her. By that time, it'll already be too late."

Lee looked at Jack directly. "Listen, big guy, you got to decide what you want to do with this thing, because we can't have you moping around like some lovesick teenager. It's sickening and unbecoming to the office."

"Lee!" Mallory cried. "Will you shut—"

"Let him talk," Jack said, his hand fisting.

"The thing is you'll never be able to get ahead if you don't put this behind you," he continued. "Face it, she was a great girl, and it was fun while it lasted, but come on, get a grip. Remember, *you're* driving the bus. You can't let the bus drive you. That's not the way it works, sporto. You have to move on before this thing eats you alive."

Mallory gripped Jack's arm. "Don't listen to him. He's just a lech. I want to smack him myself sometimes."

"No," Jack conceded, "he's a realist. And he makes some valid points."

"Thank you," Lee said, smirking at Mallory.

"Oh," she glared back at him, "you're such a child."

Lee stood, grabbing his coat. "Come on, Jack, I'll drive you home. Mallory's got to go service the husband, and I'm way past my cocktail hour."

Mallory ignored him, looking to Jack. "What will you do?"

Jack rose, kissing her on the cheek. "When I find out, you'll be the first to know."

She placed a hand on his arm. "Don't forget your talk at the World Cultural Council tomorrow morning. They're doing a live stream on NJNetwork.com. You will be there, won't you?"

He placed his hand over hers. "You can bank on it."

* * * *

“Now, of course, the program says you’re appearing as U.S. Congressman Falco and most definitely not a gubernatorial candidate,” Mallory said, adjusting Jack’s tie. “But that shouldn’t stop you from dropping a few lines about all that federal arts funding you’ve managed to secure for the state.”

“Don’t worry,” Jack said. “I will most definitely be mentioning the campaign.”

“You do that.” Lee handed him a bottle of water. “Never hurts to get personal. Act locally, think globally. But win one for the home state.”

“Get personal. Right.” Jack raked back his hair, taking a sip of water. He grinned, showing his teeth. “How do I look?”

Mallory sighed, slowly shaking her head. “You look gorgeous as always, Jack.”

Lee lightly punched his shoulder. “‘The Ladies’ Choice,’ my man.”

“*Presidential*,” Mallory said, brushing at the front of his jacket.

They could hear his name being announced. “Go kill ’em, tiger,” Lee said. “We’ll be waiting here to clean up the bodies.”

“That’s good,” Jack said over his shoulder, “but there should only be one.”

Mallory gripped Lee’s arm. “*Jack!*” But he was already acknowledging the applause.

As he walked out onto the stage, he could think of only one other time when he was this single-mindedly focused. When he was a freshman in high school and he hadn’t yet hit his growth spurt, and he was the kicker for the football team. With twenty-five seconds left on the clock, they needed one point to win, and he walked onto the field amid a hush of expectation. He didn’t even want to think about the impossible yardage he

had to cover, the team ready to pounce on him if he didn't, or the girl he was trying to impress. All he could think about was the task at hand and getting it done. And doing it right, so he would never have to do it again.

When the applause finally died down, he began. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for having me here this morning. As you may know, I have long been a supporter of the arts on both the national and international level. Arts and culture bring a human quality to our lives that is unmatched in the sphere of everyday interaction. And because this audience today is composed of artists from almost every discipline, folks generally more in tune with things closer to the heart than to the mind, I believe I've found the perfect forum to disclose what has been weighing so heavily on mine. I know this is highly irregular, using this stage as a conduit for my own agenda, but I promise I will work even more tirelessly to promote our mutual interests, if I can beg your indulgence this one time."

He abandoned the podium for the front of the stage, and the audience was rapt, silent, not offering a single objection. "Thank you," he said, and folded his hands in front of him, taking a deep breath before he continued. "Dear people, as you also may know, I am not only a congressman, but also a candidate for governor of New Jersey. I have never regretted one moment of my public life, as it is in my very nature to give back, to work to make the lives of my constituents more fulfilling, to pass laws for the greater good. In doing this, I have always told myself that to live a public life, I must forgo the private, as to do otherwise would be an oxymoron. That to fully live a life for the people, I vowed never to marry, as if I did, I would subject those I love to all the pain, separation and inattention that so often is intrinsic. For me, it was either one or the other, and up

until now, it has been a vow I've kept without too much difficulty." He took a step back, gripping the podium. "Then I fell in love."

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. Mallory's hand flew to her mouth.

He looked askance for a moment, then focused all his energy on what had become a single entity hanging on his every word. "In my public life, I have learned it isn't enough to conform to the expected decorum. I had to learn to go beyond. I had to tailor my every behavior to what was more than correct and principled and ethical, and for the most part, I think I succeeded. I learned to bring discretion to a new level. But since I fell in love I found out there are things beyond my control, and one of them is the opinion of and about the woman I love. I have learned that people will judge you even if you are a victim of circumstances, that even if you are completely innocent, you are still tainted by forces outside of your sphere.

"This is the quandary my lady now faces. That being innocent doesn't matter, because there will always be someone quick to judge. And being the forthright woman she is, she refuses to subject me to her reputation, which, although solid, she believes will tarnish me. And because of this, my lady has chosen to stay away from me." His hand fisted upon the podium. "Well, I won't have it. Because, my dear people, I must have her.

"You may be wondering who this woman is, and I'd be happy to tell you, ecstatic, in fact, but she wishes to remain anonymous, and I must honor her privacy. If and until she comes forward, until she wishes to make public the love that has so gripped hold of my heart, I'm here to tell you today I am suspending my campaign for governor—"

The crowd went wild, people rising out of their seat, rushing the stage. Jack had a moment to yell a hurried, "Thank you!" before he bolted for the wings. Mallory

intercepted him, Lee, in an instant, at her side.

“Tell me this is a joke, man!” he cried. “I’m the one in charge of campaign stunts, remember?”

“Jack,” Mallory said, gripping his arms, “are you sure?”

He looked at her, adamant. “Never surer.”

She smiled, tears in her eyes. “Well, if she doesn’t love you, I do.” She threw her arms around him. “Best of luck, Congressman. Please let me know what happens.”

“Didn’t I tell you you’d be the first?” He kissed her cheek, then scrambled for the door.

“You know what, Mallory?” Lee grinned, the press ready to flood him. “I do believe we just won the election.”

* * * *

Christmas Eve

Leslie was never more frightened in her life. She glanced back to the driveway full of cars, the sounds of laughter, glassware tinkling and music reaching through the windows to sprinkle the air all around her. Off in the distance she heard a horse whinny, and a very cautious corner of her heart hoped it was a welcome home. *Not that you’ll ever find out if you keep standing here.* She slid a hand from her pocket and knocked.

Footsteps, heavy and hurried, came toward the door. “Go ahead and start without me!” she heard, a voice rich and sonorous and decidedly missing—something. Or someone. She hoped to God it was her. The door opened.

“Hello, Jack,” she said, her heart firmly lodged in her throat.

In the time it took for Leslie to see Jack’s face go from disbelief to shock to

elation, she discovered the true nature of memory. How sometimes she couldn't remember what she was wearing under her coat, but she could never forget when she first saw the ocean. Some things were just so seminal they were stamped and printed on your brain, like when this wonderful man first reached past a ballroom table to shake her hand. Like now, as he stood before her, freezing in the chill winter night, the warmth of a thousand furnaces burning in his eyes.

"Leslie," he said, reaching for her, then thought the better of it. "Come in, please."

"No—not yet." She pulled her collar tighter around her. "First I have something to say."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Okay."

She looked to the concrete. "I heard your speech the other day. It's a lot to give up, especially after you worked so hard. Especially for someone like me. I don't deserve it."

"Leslie, you can say what—"

"Please, let me finish." She looked up. "Maybe what I'm trying to say is I don't deserve it because you shouldn't have to live without full disclosure. You shouldn't have to be responsible for hiding anything, and that includes me. You said you want to protect my privacy, but with very few exceptions, there can't be any privacy in a public life. And I fully intend to live one."

He stared at her. "What are you saying?"

"This afternoon Ted agreed to give me a divorce. I would've fought him for it anyway, but now it'll be uncontested and go a lot quicker. To be fair, and because I pretty much entered our marriage with nothing..." She smiled, a bit embarrassed. "If you must

know, I've never been very good with money. I have a fatal addiction to shoes."

He gripped her hand, kissing it. "I think I can live with that."

She shrugged. "Well, anyway, I've decided to let him keep everything, as it seems he has more than a few tabs going at some of the better gentlemen's clubs in Philadelphia, and has been stealing from his law firm's escrow accounts to feed them. The partners have promised not to prosecute if he pays with interest."

"Very generous of them."

"But that's not all." She shivered, and he pulled her closer. "After I met with Ted, I wrote list of all the baggage I've been carrying around all these years, the Ledbetter/Davis affair and what had happened with Ted, how I blamed Gina for ruining my life. And how I fell in love with you and suddenly grew a spine."

Jack ran his finger down hers, and she shivered again. "You always had one. I could've told you that."

"But I wouldn't have believed you. I had to find it myself. Because by then I would finally learn to use it. So I took that list and posted it on my blog. Then e-mailed it to an old friend at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. It's online tonight, and tomorrow it'll be in the paper."

He looked at her, amazed. "All of this means...?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but it would be selfish of me to keep my own privacy when so much of yours is out there. That if we're going to make this thing work, if we're ever going to have a publicly private life together, I have to put myself on the line right alongside you. Because if you love someone, that's just what you do." She put her hands to his face. "And I do love you, Congressman Falco, more than I ever realized."

He lifted her up and kissed her over and over and until he fell back against the doorjamb, pressing against the bell. He was still kissing her when the door opened, the bell still ringing as a half dozen faces peered out.

“Jesus, Jack,” said one, “what the hell?”

“Oops,” said Leslie. “Jack, stand up.”

He did, looking over his shoulder. “Oh, hello, Mikey. Meet the next Mrs. Falco.”

Mikey eyed him dryly. “Is that any way to treat a lady? Bring her in here—what, are you crazy? The lobster’s almost done!” He looked at Leslie. “Pleased to meet you. I’m taking it you’re Leslie.”

She nudged Jack, but he wouldn’t let go. “I am. Is that good?”

He smiled. “That’s perfect. Now come on in. You’ve got some uncles and aunts to meet. This just might take all night.”

“That’s okay,” Jack said, swinging her into his arms. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”

* * * *

Election Night, Eleven Months Later

Haddonfield Regency Hotel

Lee punched the air, his eye on the television. “Goddamn! I’ve never seen anything like it. They’re saying you could win this election with seventy-eight percent!”

“It gets even better,” Mallory said, dropping her BlackBerry into her pocket. Not even ten after eight, and they’re telling me the opposing camp is ready to concede.” She glanced at her watch. “You’d better get ready to go down to the ballroom...” She grinned. “Mr. Governor.”

“Governor Falco,” Leslie said from beside him on the sofa. “I like the ring of that.”

Jack slanted her a glance. “Hey, Mrs. Falco, how about trying ‘first lady’ on for size?”

She slanted him one of her own. “Are you telling me I’m not up to the job?”

He laughed. “Oh man, I know better than to do that.”

“Come on, Lee,” Mallory said, tugging his arm. “Let’s give them a few minutes.”

“Watch for the concession,” Lee said. “You’ll go on right after that.”

After the door closed Jack turned to Leslie, propping his head against his hand. “I hear Drumthwacket is beautiful this time of year.”

“The governor’s mansion would be beautiful any time of year...with you in it.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” he said, moving closer.

She met him in the middle. “I’d still be here if you ran for dog catcher.”

“I’m not too fond of dogs...” he said, his lips grazing hers.

“I believe you just lost the dog vote,” she said, nipping his.

“But I sure as hell love you,” he said, lowering her to the cushions.

He kissed her, his hand on her thigh, and it didn’t take long before he was hard and her panties had hit the floor. “But Jack...” she whispered, low and breathless, “I’m not ready—it’s still in my purse!”

He unzipped, spread her legs and in a flash he was inside her. “Sweetheart, I’m the governor and I’m in love. Come on, Leslie...” He began to move, smiling against her mouth. “Let’s make a dynasty.”

* * * *

Meanwhile, downstairs in the Ballroom...

“Will you *look* at this shit?” Doug said, swirling his gin and tonic, “Falco’s nailed it in less than ten minutes.”

“You mark my words,” Gina said, leaning against him, her maternity top a sparkly gold and silver. “Five years from now he’ll be announcing to follow Barack.”

Roark pushed away from the bar, grabbing the back of Pam’s stool. “You know, I’ve been pondering some political aspirations of my own. Jeff Mackley called me the other day. Wants me to run for city council with him.”

“I know Jeff,” said Gina. “He’s a good guy. I’ll bet next year he runs for Assembly. You could do a lot worse.”

Pam turned to look at him. “You never told me about this.”

Roark shrugged. “So far it’s just been bullshit talk. Nothing serious.”

“Well, keep it that way. Because you’re not going to have the time.”

“What are you talking about, woman?” he said. “Hey, the kids are almost a year old, and excuse me, but aren’t you going out to Hollywood to work on the picture? When do I get to have fun?” He tweaked her bottom, and she squealed, slapping at him.

“Sweetie, it seems we’ve been having a little too much fun lately. Remember that tubal ligation you talked me out of because a vasectomy was *sooooo* much easier?”

Roark’s eyes widened. “You’re not saying...”

Doug’s drink hit the bar. “Son of a bitch—score one for *coitus interruptus*!”

THE END