



MAC FLYNN

PALE
Stranger

PALE STRANGER

PALE SERIES, BOOK 1

MAC FLYNN

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It all started with ketchup. I wasn't scheduled to work that night at the diner, but one of my coworkers slipped on a packet of ketchup and sprained her butt. That's why I was called in to fill her position that dark and stormy night when *he* showed up.

It was the usual chaos around the diner, a dirty little place off the intersection of Going and Nowhere, which, like this book, was the story of my life. I'd worked at the small, cramped, old-fashioned rectangular building for the last seven years and saw myself coming near the end of my college years without any way to brake and put the car of life in reverse. I was plump, but not fat, witty, but not mean, blond haired, but not dumb, and made more friends than enemies with whom I met. It was a comfortable life, other than the stress of college and work, but not one with much prospect of becoming a millionaire and living a life of retirement at age forty. If I kept up this pace I could retire at four hundred and spend the rest of my days on life-support.

One of my friends, Sheila, was helping me run the diner that night. The rush hour of regulars was over, the hour was late, and our muscles were tired from scampering from table to table all night taking orders. Sheila, a skinny young girl of twenty with as much ambition as a sloth, plopped

herself down in a chair beside the door to the kitchen. She glanced outside and shook her head. “What a night,” she sighed.

She wasn’t kidding. A storm raged outside the windows the likes of which I’d seen only once or twice before. I’d just washed the outside of the windows yesterday, so that ensured that the wind blew leaves and rain against all of them. The wind blew so hard people had trouble staying on their feet, and I swear I even saw a cow fly by, which was strange considering we were in the middle of the city.

“Trixie?”

“Huh? What?” That was my name, and Sheila was calling it.

“I said, do you think the power will go out? We don’t have any way to keep the burger patties frozen if the fridge dies,” she pointed out.

I shrugged. “Then we’ll have to take one for the team and eat them all ourselves,” I told her.

She snorted. “As if. I’d be so bloated I couldn’t fit through the door.”

I shuddered; being stuck at work all night wasn’t my idea of fun. Maybe somebody else’s idea, but I wouldn’t have been a part of that planning process. “If the power does go out just don’t open the doors.”

“Or hope it goes out after we leave,” she added. “How much longer do we have?”

I glanced at my watch, and around the diner. Two diners were finishing up their meals. “We have an hour left and then it’s rough sailing through the storm.” I walked around the counter to one of the booths and glanced out the window. The streets were running with water. “Looks like some of the city’s fine sanitary infrastructure isn’t working right,” I told Sheila.

“The whats-it?” she asked me.

“The sewer drains are clogged,” I rephrased. “At the rate the rain’s coming down we might need to flip one of these tables over and use it as a boat to get home.” I glanced over to our two remaining customers. “Sirs, you might want to get a move on or you’ll have trouble getting through the

streets.” The two men were nice enough to finish their meals, pay and get out, leaving Sheila and me alone with just the cook in the back. He was as friendly as a bear awoken in mid-hibernation, so we didn’t include him in our conversations.

After I showed the last man out and made sure the door shut behind him, I glanced at my watch. Half an hour left. Outside the storm raged like a toddler hell-bent on destroying a model city, and the night was so dark I couldn’t see more than a yard past the doors. The decrepit streetlights were broken, and the rain came down in sheets of thick silk. The owner of the diner was very strict about closing and opening on time, but the weather was so bad and made me so nervous that my hand hovered over the lock.

I didn’t even see the man until his face was pressed against glass. My loud, vibrating scream registered on the Richter scale, and I stumbled back onto the floor when the door swung open. Sheila, my brave and bold friend, ducked down beneath the counter and the cook stuck his head out of the kitchen.

The man who stepped inside was almost six feet tall with a fedora hat on his head and a heavy trench coat over his body. On the floor I could even see his shoes; simple and black with pointy tips. What really scared me was his skin; it was as pale as paper, the white printer kind, not that colorful construction kind that’s fun to cut up. He had a pair of bright blue eyes that stood out against the white color like Christmas lights on a snowman. This guy didn’t look jolly enough to be Frosty, not with those pursed lips, though he was dripping on the floor I’d just cleaned an hour ago out of sheer boredom.

I started back when he bent down and offered his hand to me; it was covered in a thick black glove. “I’m sorry to have startled you. Are you all right?” he asked me in a deep, firm voice. It was the kind that would make a girl swoon to the floor if I hadn’t already been down there.

I took his hand and was surprised how warm it felt through the glove. He pulled me up with more strength than I'd give a man who looked like he had one foot in the grave, or a serious accident with flour. "I'm fine, just this stupid weather," I replied as I brushed myself off. "But what can I do for you?" At this point I normally let the customers seat themselves, but he wasn't a normal customer. Hell, he didn't look like a normal person, not with those bright eyes staring unblinkingly at me. Gave me the willies, creeps, heebiejeebies, and made me a touch nervous. I also wanted to close up early, now more than ever with Dracula standing there. I wouldn't have minded a bit of ravishing because he wasn't bad looking without the pale skin, but the bloodsucking was a bit of a drain on a relationship.

"Coffee, your strongest," he requested. He shuffled over to the counter and took a seat in the very center. That was my work area for the evening, so I sighed and went around the counter to find Sheila still cowering beneath there.

I glared at her and gestured for her to get up, but she shook her head. I glanced up and caught the customer staring at me funny, probably because I'd been mouthing words of warning at my cowering coworker. I plastered a wide, terrifying grin on my face and fetched a cup of our drink. At this late in the evening it wasn't so much coffee as it was sludge filled with coffee grounds. It was guaranteed to keep the drinker awake for five days, or bring them back from the dead. The guy didn't look like he needed a remedy for the second, so I figured he wanted to be up during the day.

I filled the cup with the oozing mess and plopped it down in front of him; the surface jiggled. The damn thing had attained sentience. "Careful, it's, well, alive," I warned him.

The stranger was mesmerized by the jiggling. "Is it safe to drink?" he asked me.

"Yeah, but you'd better hurry and drink it before it demands citizenship," I advised. At that moment I felt a tug on my leg; Sheila was

wanting my attention. “Excuse me for a moment, I think the rats want to talk to me about their union dues.” I had enough time to see his bewildered expression before I slipped beneath the counter. I dropped my voice to a low, hissing whisper so he couldn’t overhear. “What are you doing? Get up!”

Sheila shook her head, and her eyes were wide and as round as diner plates. “Not with that creepy guy! Did you get a look at his face through the door?” she squeaked.

“I’m pretty sure I got a good look at him from five inches away,” I replied. “Now get up and show what kind of a man you can be.”

“But I’m not a man, and I just want him to leave!”

“Then it’s time you traded in your breasts for some balls, and stood up,” I hissed back at her.

“Is there a problem?” the stranger spoke up.

We both froze; we hadn’t been quiet enough to escape his sharp ears. I grabbed Sheila’s shoulders and hauled her with me as I stood. We both plastered smiles on our faces, and startled the man. “Sorry about that, my coworker here lost a power saw and needed help finding it.”

“A...power saw?” the man repeated.

“For cutting our way home through this storm,” I told him. “We get off in half an hour and want to be prepared for anything.”

The man looked concerned. “Am I keeping you from leaving? I can leave, if you want.” He got as far as one leg off the stool before I sighed and shook my head.

“No, it’s all right.” Sheila’s clinging hands on my arm begged to differ. “We don’t mind staying open for a few more minutes while you finish your, um, sentient life.” I couldn’t bring myself to belittle the coffee by calling it a drink; that would hurt its feelings.

We all jumped when a door slammed at the back of the diner.

“What was that?” the stranger asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Apparently the cook minded staying and just went home for the night. I hope you didn’t want a meal with your drink because the most we can do is scrambled eggs, and I’m not so sure about the scrambled part,” I warned him.

“No, this coffee will do.” He was being kind; the sludge blinked at him. I worried it thought he was its mother. “But are you sure you don’t want me to leave?”

“No, it’s fine.” There was that tugging on my arm again; I’d have to have that nervous twitch looked at after he left. “You must have been pretty desperate to come in here.”

“To be honest I’m not too familiar with this part of town and your lights looked the friendliest, so I came inside,” he told us. “A sort of sailor adrift who catches sight of land and swims to it.”

“I hope you can still swim because if this storm gets any worse we’re all going to be needing to,” I quipped. The rain still beat on the windows and an old farmhouse flew by.

The stranger took his mug and downed the rest of the contents; I hoped I hadn’t just poisoned him. “I really appreciate your kindness. Not many would serve me on this sort of night,” he mused with a sad smile.

I shrugged. “I’d keep serving at this place even if the world was coming to an end. Nobody should have to face the Rapture on an empty stomach.”

He chuckled, and those eyes twinkled. “I’d like to do something nice for you as a token of my appreciation.” He pulled out a card from an inner coat pocket and slid it over to me. I glanced down, and saw an address and the letter B in a circle printed on the front. “That’s where I live.”

My mind proceeded to conjure up images of bad porn films; not that I’d seen any, of course. “I don’t really make house calls, so you’ll have to pour your own coffee,” I told him. I pushed the card toward him, and he pushed it back.

“This isn’t anything like that,” he assured me. “I’d like to interview you for a job I have in mind, and would prefer a more private surrounding.”

I leaned over the counter and stared him straight in the eyes. “This isn’t a sex job, is it?”

He grinned. “Quite the opposite, but are you looking for such work?”

I straightened and opened my arms to show my flabby body. “There’s plenty of folds to put the dollar bills, but I don’t think the pole could support me.”

He chuckled; this guy was easy to please. “I can see what you mean, but my offer still stands. Come to my house for the interview at eight o’clock tomorrow evening and we’ll see what we can work out.” That worked for me; I didn’t have any college classes that late. He tossed down a twenty dollar bill for a fifty cent cup of coffee and slid off the stool.

The fellow wasn’t giving me much time to think about this offer, and he’d given me even less information to decide what to do. “Wait, I don’t even know your name!” I protested as he walked toward the door.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder with a dazzlingly pale smile on his face. “It’s John Benson,” he replied.

“And don’t you want to know mine?”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to know it. I’ll just call you my little Angel.”

I wasn’t modest enough to dispute the angel tag, but the little was not quite accurate. He was out the door and gone before I could say anything else.

Sheila came up to me with her hand raised and a finger pointed at the door. “H-h-he’s-”

“-gone, I know,” I finished for her.

She whipped her head to me and frowned. “Didn’t you hear his name?” she snapped at me.

“My memory hasn’t slowed up these long minutes with him,” I countered.

I noticed Sheila’s attitude had changed from a cowering coward to a giddy schoolgirl. “Then don’t you know who he is?” she whispered.

“The only things I need to know is that he’s a guy offering me a job, and I don’t have to strip to do it.”

“He’s *the* John Benson, of Benson Investments,” Sheila explained to me.

I stared at her blankly. “He’s who of what?”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “It’s only one of the largest investing companies in the country, and he’s the head of it!”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure I would have heard about a business with an albino at the head of it. News like that’s too good for the papers to ignore.”

“It’s because he doesn’t let anyone see him. He works from home and rarely travels.”

“Then how do you know it’s him? John Benson isn’t exactly a rare name.”

She snatched the card from my hand and pointed at the B. “See? That’s his company’s logo.”

I snatched the card back and stuffed the card into the front of my blouse. The damn thing stuck out and I abandoned my attempt to look cool by shoving it into my pocket. “So how come you know so much about him?” I asked her. She was the type of girl who only looked at a man’s business to assess his bank account.

“Because he’s young, eligible, and I knew he lived somewhere around the city,” she told me. “So are you going to go?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. I don’t work tomorrow, so I may as well see what he’s offering.”

She pressed against me and clasped her hands together. “Can I go with you? Pretty please?”

“You work tomorrow,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, but if he really likes me I may never have to work again,” she countered.

“How about you catch your own wealthy businessman and leave him to me? Besides, you’re scared of him, remember? Pale skin and creepy blue eyes?”

We jumped when something hard knocked against the window and reminded us of the end of the world outside. That scared the gold-digger out of Sheila, and she nervously glanced at the windows and nodded. “Yeah, on second thought, he’s all yours. I’ll wait for the next one.”

Truth be told I wasn't sure I wanted this rich man, either. The way his blue eyes looked at me made me feel nervous, and that's why the next day I brought Old Unreliable out of the closet. It was a handgun of ancient lineage, sometime before Elvis, and hadn't been properly cleaned since the King's death. That made it a very unreliable gun and possibly a dangerous gun. It was probably more likely to shoot the person behind the gun than in front of it. Still, it was all I had for protection against this odd rich man and his strange propositions.

The next thing I did was call my mom. She lived in the same city but clear across town, much farther from my college than I wanted to commute so I lived in my own dingy apartment. She answered the phone after two rings, probably because she recognized the number and knew she wouldn't be harassed by a telemarketer, just her daughter. "Hey, Mom," I greeted her.

"What do you want now?" she asked me.

"Advice. Is that free or do I need to give you my debit card number?" I joked.

"Trixie Calhoun, don't you dare say that number over the phone. Goodness knows who will hear it," she scolded.

I rolled my eyes. "Probably just us and the rats in my apartment."

She sounded exasperated. “And I wish you’d move back home. I know you wanted to be closer to the campus, but that filthy place is just disgusting.”

“It won’t be home for much longer if I can just finish these next two years of homework and dirty looks from the teachers,” I pointed out. “But I called to ask your advice about something. I met a guy last night-”

“Finally!” she exclaimed.

“-who for all I know is married,” I continued. I heard the steam escape her inflated hope. “And he said he might have a job for me, maybe a better one. I said I’d come by his home tonight and see what he’s offering.”

Mom didn’t sound happy about this at all. “Where does he live?”

“According to the address he gave me, somewhere out in the middle of nowhere, or about fifteen miles out of town,” I replied.

“And how long have you known this Mr.-?”

“We talked for about fifteen minutes,” I guessed.

My mom sighed. “Trixie, this sounds really bad. How old is this man? What does he do?”

My heart sank, but I wasn’t going to take the safe route out; fortune favored the bold, and I was hoping for a small fortune from this rich benefactor. “He’s about thirty and Sheila told me he runs his own company. Some Benson Investors or something”

“That doesn’t bring me comfort,” Mom dryly commented.

“I know, that’s why I’m taking Old Unreliable. If anything goes wrong I can make the situation worse.”

“For you or him?” she wondered.

“If I’m the one in back of the gun it might be more me,” I admitted. “But he was sickly looking, so if push comes to rape I think I can take him.”

Mom groaned. “Trixie, I know I can’t convince you to not go, but please, *please* be careful, and don’t forget your cell phone.”

“I’m a college student, Mom, I have that with me twenty-four seven.” I often forgot it in my car. “And I’ll call as soon as I get back from the house.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

I ended the call and sighed. I hated to admit it, but Mom was right, this was a dangerous undertaking. The big problem was I was a little desperate on cash. I had a big rent payment coming in a month along with a new semester of book-buying that was sure to drive me into poverty, and my pay at the diner couldn’t cut through soft cheese, much less these large expenses. If I went without food I could make things work, but my body refused to die for my college tuition.

There was always the option of asking my mom for money, but my pride wouldn’t allow it. No matter how much I’d begged Pride, it always said no; damn stubborn thing. That meant my last hope was this unusual offer from an even stranger man to drive out to his place far in the country to see about the unknown job. What could go wrong?

THAT EVENING I got into my car that smoked so bad it looked like it ran on coal, and drove out to Mr. Benson’s house. Thanks to Google maps I knew where I was going, otherwise people would’ve seen my skeleton driving by still searching for that damn road. I took so many lefts and rights that I was cross-eyed and upside down by the time I hit the final road up to the place. When the house came into view I was pretty impressed, and horrifically terrified. It was an old Victorian mansion complete with ghoulish gables, ominous eaves, and spooky steps. The lawn around the house was well-kept and a circular driveway ran up to the front porch. There was a garage on the left side of the house with a heavy cloth that ran from the exterior door of

the house to the garage side door. I parked at the steps, but made sure not to hit the parking brake just in case I needed to make a quick getaway.

I stepped out of the car and was surprised when lightning didn't ominously flash across the sky behind the house. The stairs up to the porch squeaked like they needed oil, and an old Marley knocker sat in the center of the door. I gingerly grabbed the knocker and banged it against the entrance. The noise echoed through the hollow-sounding house, and in a minute I heard a quick tapping noise. It grew louder and faster the closer it came to me like a bomb about to go off, and I was just about to duck for cover when the door swung open. Rather than a bomb there stood a bombshell in the form of a beautiful woman. She was average height and a mathematical improbability of 36-24-36. A lot of women would have killed to have those measurements, making a lot of women murderers. Fortunately for this woman I was not one of them, and I smiled at her. "Hi, um, is this where Mr. Benson lives?"

She looked me over with the only displeasing part of her: narrow, suspicious eyes set behind a pair of small, square glasses. I knew we were going to be good friends when she sneered at me, and her voice sounded like she'd rather let the dogs loose on me than talk to me. "You must be Miss Angel," she spat out.

I wiped the spittle off my face and my smile got a little thinner. "Miss Angel is too formal. Please call me Miss Calhoun."

My joke fell flatter than a buttered piece of toast dropped onto the floor. "Follow me, and remember to close the door."

She probably thought I was born in a barn, which showed how little she knew about me; I was born in a tool shed. I stepped inside and saw that the decor was done up in late eighteenth century Dracula, complete with no mirrors. On my left and right were the dining and living rooms. In front was a long hallway that stretched to the back of the deep house, and beside the hallway rose a narrow staircase with a landing to reach the second floor.

Miss Measurements led me upstairs where the hall curved back to run in line with the long hallway on the bottom floor. We stopped in front of a door that looked like every other one, and she knocked. "Mr. Benson, your-" she glanced at me with venomous snake eyes, "-guest is here." With this woman I felt like a meal waiting to be eaten.

"Bring her in," came the familiar voice of the pale stranger. I almost bowled the woman over to get at him; I preferred Dracula over this She-Beast any day. At least he'd make love to me before eating me. The room we stepped into was a bedroom done up in a spartan style complete with Greek vases on a shelf. The bed sat opposite the door beside a window, and Mr. Benson lay under the covers with a smile on his face. "Good evening."

I wanted to ask if he drank wine, but the situation was uncomfortable enough with viper lady beside me. "Um, good evening. Nice place you have here. Must be popular with the trick-or-treaters."

The woman rolled her eyes, but Benson chuckled. "It would be very popular if there were any children this far out." He glanced to the woman. "You may leave us now, Miss Sievers." She nodded, cast another wishful look of death-and-horrible-pain at me and left us alone, taking some of the tension with her. I breathed a sigh of relief loud enough for the sharp-eared man to hear me. "Does she make you uncomfortable?" he asked me.

She'd make a psychopath nervous, but I had to act professional in this very unprofessional room. "A little," I replied.

"I must admit she isn't very friendly, and as my personal secretary and diplomat I need someone more personable who isn't afraid of both my opponents and me."

I thought I heard a job opening in his words. "Personal secretary? Is that the job you want me for?"

He nodded. "Yes. As you can see I'm not a very photogenic person myself and need a face to act as a go-between for me to the outside world."

"But you were out last night," I pointed out.

“A doctor’s appointment, and you can see the success.” He gestured down to his sheet-covered self. “But I don’t believe you came here to discuss my medical matters. How are you with in writing down notes?”

“I’ve caught several pencils on fire from taking orders,” I replied.

He chuckled. “This I have to see.” He grabbed a pen and pad beside on the nightstand and held them out to me. I hesitated, but he wasn’t insulted. “It’s fine, these don’t bite.”

“Have you ever had a paper cut?” I countered, but took the items.

“Now try to write down everything I say.” He spoke a few lines about stocks and bonds, and I took them down as well as I could manage. “Now let me see what you wrote.” I handed back the pad, and a puzzled expression swept across his face. “I can’t read this at all.”

I shrugged and smiled. “It’s my own shorthand for taking orders. No cryptographer or cook has ever deciphered it.”

“So that’s why waitresses always yell the orders,” he mused with a grin. “Read back the contents and let me see how well you wrote down my words.” I took back the pad and repeated the lines. He gave a satisfied nod. “Very good. Now do you know anything about investing or stocks?”

“You do remember where we met, right?”

He shrugged. “It was worth asking, but I suppose this will keep you from-” There was a sudden noise outside the bedroom door. Benson performed a miracle when he flung aside the covers and crossed the room in a few strides. He swung open the door to find nobody there, but he stuck out his head to check the hall.

I checked my watch. Ten past eight. “I thought the union rules said spooks couldn’t wander until midnight,” I mused.

“They walk these halls even during the day...” he muttered. He closed the door and turned to me with a smile. “But when can you start?”

I held up my hands. “I just serve food that makes ghosts. You’re going to have to call someone else for the extermination.”

He crossed over to me and grabbed my shoulders. His warm hands burned holes through my sleeves and into my skin; that was a new shirt, too. "But you're just who I need to help me. No one else will do."

I blinked in bewilderment. "Do what?"

"Your new job with me here as my personal secretary," he explained. "When can you start?"

"First you need to explain your miraculous recovery," I replied. I jerked my head toward the bed. "You were in invalid one minute, and the next you looked like Jessie Owens. What's the deal?"

He sighed and released me. "A conservation of energy, a focus of the mind, and-"

"-and being really angry at someone," I finished. "That noise we heard was Miss Whats-Her-Name, wasn't it?"

He regretfully nodded. "Miss Constance Sievers."

"Her name is right. She's constantly around," I quipped.

"Yes, I'm afraid I can't-" he didn't get to finish his sentence because his legs buckled and he dropped forward. I caught him before he ate floor and let him down the rest of the way. He had a shaky, wry smile on his face. "I'm sorry you had to see that. A consequence of my over-exertion just now."

"I've seen worse," I assured him. He raised an eyebrow in question. "Let's just say it involved alcohol and a ping pong paddle."

"I shall ask no more questions, just help me up to the bed," he promised. I hefted one of his arms over my shoulder and dragged his limp body onto the bed, where he sat up but leaned his right shoulder against the wall. His ghostly pallor was as white as bleach and not nearly as useful in cleaning. "Now you see why I am in need of a strong, young, helpful woman."

"You're in need of a better doctor. If this is what happens after every visit then the one you're going to is an aspiring murderer," I told him.

“Perhaps, but I need a set of clear eyes to tell the frauds from the real ones. I don’t trust Miss Sievers’ eyes any longer, but I believe I can trust yours.” He caught me in those deep pools of blue. I felt myself slipping into them, which was very unsafe without a life jacket. “Will you take on the job? I’m begging you to help me.”

I held up my hand to stop him from saying any more; if he did I’d fall for his blue eyes hook, line, and wriggling fish. “First, mind if I ask a few questions before I remove Miss Scary-Lady from her position?”

He smirked and gave a nod. “Go ahead.”

“First off, how much is the pay?”

“In a year’s time you could probably buy the diner I found you working at.”

I tried not to squeal with joy. “Sounds fair enough, what about the hours?”

“What are your current hours?” he asked me.

“From the butt-crack of dawn until closing time hits, whether I’ve collapsed by then or not,” I told him.

“I refuse to believe the day exists before noon, and I go to bed when my health forces me to,” he explained to me. That worked with my class schedule; I was done before noon to work at the diner.

“And I work all those hours?”

“No, only four of them, and a few odds and ends when the need arises.”

“Like it did just now?” I wondered, and he nodded. “Anything strange and kinky you need me to do?”

He laughed and shook his head. “None that I can think of. Did you have something in mind?”

“Plenty, but let’s keep my mind out of the gutter while we’re talking business. It dirties up the verbal contract,” I replied.

“Then we have a deal?” He was as desperate as a teenager on his first night in the Paris nightlife. I couldn’t say no to a man in such desperate

need to rid himself of such a woman as Miss Sievers, but I didn't want to dive into a pool until I was sure there weren't any sharks; I didn't want to spend the rest of my days with the nickname of Lefty.

"We have a deal, but on one condition," I answered.

He stiffened. "And that would be?"

"I get a trial run. At the end if I'm not happy then I go back to work at the diner," I explained to him.

Benson furrowed his brow, but nodded. "Very well, but how will you get away from your current job?"

I shrugged. "I'm up for a vacation." Seven years behind on a vacation; I'd never taken one except when I was sick, which didn't happen often. "My boss will miss me dearly, but I'm sure Sheila won't blow the place up while I'm gone."

"Sheila?" he wondered.

"The girl you met last night. She's Sheila," I replied.

"Ah, I see." He looked me over with a contemplative gaze.

I glanced down at myself to see if there was a spaghetti stain; it was all clear. "What? I have a booger hanging out or something?"

Benson shook his head. "No, but there's one very important question I'm surprised you haven't asked me."

I pointed at his face. "You mean about your rolled-in-flour look?" I asked him. He didn't look mad, just nodded. "Well, are you going to die on me because of it?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps not, but we all die some time."

"Yeah, but I don't want to have a heart attack after finding you and make it a double funeral," I countered.

Benson chuckled. "Well, I can assure you I am as healthy as a horse right now." I looked him up and down; only if the horse was on its last leg out of four and going blind. Still, he had shown a lot of spryness when

racing to the door, so that was a point on his side; the horse could still run when it wanted to.

“Then that’s all the questions I had for you. You have any for me?”

He stroked his chin in one hand and looked me over with those sky-blue eyes. He would have made a diabolical and dashing villain if he had a goatee instead of that scruff. “Have you any boyfriend or husband?”

I folded my arms across my chest and smiled at him. “None that I know of. Is that required for the position?”

“No, but one must know how many liberties one can take with their employees,” he countered.

“Don’t take too many liberties or I’ll give you death,” I playfully warned.

He smiled and nodded. “Fair enough. Would you like to stay here for your week of experimentation?”

I shook my head. There was no sense getting so attached that I find myself joined at his hip. “I’ll commute. The scenery isn’t that bad.”

“Very well. I believe that’s all the questions I have for you.”

“Then I’ll see you at eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” I promised him.

He held out his hand and I gave it a good shake; he gave one better and I got back sore fingers. “Be attentive when you’re driving out here. These roads are rather winding and it’s easy to get lost.”

I shook my head. “Nothing more than city blocks of corn and wheat. I can handle it.”

I didn't handle it; the trip back took an hour longer, and by the time I shuffled into my dreary apartment it was past ten. The peeling wallpaper and cockroaches welcomed me home, and I wondered if I'd been thinking when I refused his offer to stay at that fancy, albeit creepy, house.

"Too late now..." I muttered to myself.

I plopped down in my dusty old recliner and dialed the phone number to the diner to call in my vacation for the next week. Sheila answered. "Dan's Delicious Diner. How can I help you?"

I don't know how Dan hadn't been sued for false advertising; maybe he'd invited his critics over for some of his Lasagna Surprise and murdered them that way. "Hi, Sheila, it's Trixie. How did everything go today?"

I pulled my ear away from the phone when she let out a squeal of joy. "Trixie! You're alive! Dracula didn't kill you!"

I risked "No, I'm a few pints less than before I went but I'm healthy otherwise," I replied. I rolled my eyes when there was a gasp on the other line. "I'm joking, Sheila. Besides the phone, is the rest of the diner still standing?"

She put on her best pouting voice. "It's all fine. The boss wouldn't let me handle the shift, so Denise is in charge of the diner," she told me. The

diner was saved.

“I want you to tell the boss that I’m taking a vacation for a week starting tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I don’t think the boss will allow that, Trix. That’s awful short notice,” Sheila worriedly replied.

I chuckled. “He owes me enough overtime pay that I don’t think he’s going to complain.”

“But what are you going to do for a-” Sheila let out a gasp. “You’re not taking him up on that offer he made you, are you? Please don’t do it!”

“Sheila, you don’t even know what I’m doing,” I countered. “All I’m going to do is be his personal secretary for a week. If things don’t work out I’ll go straight back to the diner.”

“You promise?” she choked out.

“I promise, and I’ll come check up on you a few of the days to make sure the diner isn’t burnt down,” I laughed.

“Hardy-har-har. I’ll have you know I haven’t done anything-” there was a sudden crash in the background and screaming. “Um, I gotta go.”

I slapped my face. “Before you go tell me if somebody is dead.”

“Um, no, but I have to go call the hospital. Bye.” The line went dead; I hoped nobody else did.

I sighed and hung my arms over the side of the chair while my head leaned back so I could look up at the ceiling. The ceiling was so badly water-stained it could’ve been mistaken for a Rorschach ink blot test. I traced out what I was thinking about through those little blots and realized I’d drawn a picture of Benson. A pair of deep stains stood in for his glacier-river blue eyes, and the rest of the pasty ceiling was a good mimic of his own skin. I sighed and dragged my hand over my face. The last twenty-four hours had been the strangest in my life, but I could see how the next week would beat that record.

Now I had to call my mom. I needed to comfortably lay down for this one, so I went into my room, tossed the card with his address on my dresser, and flopped down on the bed. I hardly noticed when the card slipped into my underwear drawer as I dialed and she picked up after the first ring. “Hey mom, I’m alive.”

“You don’t sound alive,” she countered.

“I’m just tired.” I glanced over at my kitchen table and saw a stack of homework waiting for me. “But I’ve got a temp job with the guy that might turn into something permanent.”

“How’s the pay?” My mom was shrewd with these things; she could haggle an elephant out of its trunk.

“Really good.” I wish I knew exactly how good, and I recalled we hadn’t mentioned anything about money for this experiment.

“And...and what do you have to do?” Mom always had a funny sense of priorities; money first and work later.

“Not anything your dirty mind is thinking of,” I told her. “It’s just some secretary work. You know, making phone calls and filing. Nothing sexual in any way unless you count licking the envelopes.”

“And you think this is legitimate? He’s not trying to get at you for, well,-”

“-for immoral purposes?” I finished for her. “Nope. He just seems kind of lonely.”

Mom sighed. “Well, if anyone can bring comfort to another person other than their own mother that would be you.”

I smiled. “I’ll be all right, I promise. It’s not like I’m going to fall in love with him or anything.”

THE NEXT MORNING after classes I drove out to the house and was greeted at the driveway entrance by a speeding vehicle careening down my way. I

swerved, complete with screaming action, and avoided a bad double car crash by nearly wrecking my car against a tree. The other car drove past and I saw Miss Sievers at the wheel; she glanced at me and in those eyes I felt a thousand and one fires try to consume me. Fortunately the car window somehow didn't melt from the heat, and she drove out of sight.

I drove the rest of the way like an old lady late for a date with her maker, and arrived at the house ten minutes late. The place looked deserted, which reminded me that I hadn't had any breakfast, but I boldly went where I'd gone before and climbed onto the porch. I knocked, but nobody came to the door. Fortunately the knob was unlocked and I let myself in. The place was quiet but for a consistently irritating noise from upstairs that sounded like feet stomping on the floor.

I went up and noticed the door to Benson's room was open, so I crept down there and peeked inside. The man himself paced the room and grumbled to himself. "Damn her! Stupid son of a--"

"-dog," I finished for him.

He jumped at my surprise intrusion and whipped his head to the door so hard I heard a crack. "Angel! Is it that time already?"

"Noon is usually at this time," I told him.

"Ten past twelve. You're late," he scolded me.

I shrugged; what was he going to do, fire me? "Miss Sievers was so glad to see me she nearly caused our cars to hug each other."

"That must have been her parting gift to you," he replied. "She's left my employ, and I'm glad for it. I'll need you to be her replacement until I can find another one."

I wasn't happy for the promotion. "Wait a minute, we agreed on a week, remember? This is a dry test run to see if I can do this." I hoped the rest of this test wouldn't be dry; I could have really used a drink right about then.

He sat down on the bed and ran his hand through his thick hair, giving him a wild look. It didn't help that he hadn't combed it and was still in his

pajamas. “I expect to get another secretary within that time, but I must plead with you to stay with me until then. I have a head for numbers, but for schedules and cooking the connection to the neck is severed.”

“When that happens I’ll be sure to have the duct tape ready,” I promised.

He snorted. “You have some wit about you, but I can see your hands are shaking. The near-miss with Constance must have been very close.”

“Any closer and our cars would have been a car,” I told him.

He slapped his knees and jumped to his feet. “Well, let’s get this day started. I was at least careful to have Constance make the schedule light so we have most of the day to play.” He opened the drawer to a nightstand beside his bed and pulled out a black booklet, which he handed to me. “This is my schedule book. I follow it exactly to the letter. Everything else you’ll need is in my desk drawer in the study located down the hall from the living room.” I opened the book and saw that neat handwriting had written down everything from when meals would be served to an exercise hour in the afternoon. It left me feeling constrained, so I slammed the book shut and held it out to him. He glanced from my hand up to my face. “Is something wrong?”

“I’ve memorized all the appointments for your business, so I don’t need this until tomorrow,” I replied.

He didn’t take the booklet. “Are you sure?”

I tossed it at him and he juggled it in his hands. “Positive. The other stuff is mostly just food and exercise.” His stomach grumbled, and mine joined his to make a chorus of hunger. “Speaking of which, where’s the kitchen?”

He chuckled, took the book and put it back into its drawer. “I’ll show you after I dress.” He changed his clothes and led me downstairs, through the dining room on the left and into the rear of the house. Back there was an impressive kitchen filled with all the amenities I wasn’t used to having,

including ant-free fridge and rodent-less sink. Benson sat himself down at the island in the center and gestured to the fridge. “Let’s see how you cook breakfast,” he invited me. I envied a person able to make a living and get up at noon for breakfast.

I cringed. “Remember that joke I made about the scrambled eggs?”

“Yes, why?”

“I wasn’t exactly joking when I made that joke.”

“Well, give it a try and I’ll tell you what I think,” he invited me. Thus began the second mishap of the day after the near-car crash. After the flames were put out on the stove and the pan deposited in the sink, Benson looked at me in amazement. “I had no idea you could catch eggs on fire.”

“Yeah, one of my specialties is flambeing everything out of existence, or at least edibility,” I explained. “You should have seen what happened when I boiled water.”

He glanced over at the still-smoking pan with the charred remains of the eggs. “I have an idea of what happened. Perhaps I’d better cook my own food while you’re here.”

“For our own survival that would be a good idea,” I agreed.

We exchanged places and he managed to make a decent, safe meal of toast and milk. With the fire danger known as breakfast out of the way we had some time to kill and bury before a scheduled phone call from someone named Greg Monroe. “Would you like to be shown the grounds?” Benson suggested.

I shrugged. “Sure.”

I expected to be led outside, but instead Benson guided me upstairs. “There’s a few things I need to take care of before I go outside.”

“Things?”

“You’ll understand when you see it.” That sounded ominously kinky; I wasn’t sure whether to be excited or nervous, so I opted for stoic.

We stopped at a door before his bedroom and he opened it to reveal a modern bathroom complete with jacuzzi. I would have killed to try that thing out, but first I needed to see the grounds to know where to put Benson's body. He took out a large bottle from beneath the sink and sat down on the edge of the jacuzzi; that's when things got wild. Benson slipped his shirt over his head and revealed a pale but finely chiseled chest. My eyes roamed over those nice, hard abs and down to the waistband of his pants. Heat pooled between my legs, and for a fleeting moment I dreamed of two people in the jacuzzi.

I must have squeaked because he glanced up and smirked at me. "You're drooling," he informed me.

I shut my drooling mouth and blushed. "Sorry."

"I'm sure you're surprised by my physique." Yeah, surprised, that was the word... "I exercise on my machines as much as I can to keep fit." He held out the container to me. "Do you mind?"

My mind was long gone, turned to ooze at his nakedness. "What mind?" I murmured. Then I snapped myself out of my daze and shook the dirty thoughts from my head. "I mean mind what?"

"Applying this sunscreen to my body." My inner slut squealed. "I burn easily without it, especially on this nice a day."

"Um, sure." My shaky hands took the bottle, and he angled himself so I could sit behind him and apply the sunscreen to his back.

"I can get the front," he assured me.

Damn. "All right," I replied. I sat on the edge of the jacuzzi behind him and applied a good slop of the stuff to his back. My hands rubbed all over his broad, strong back, gliding over every crease and muscle. Images flashed in my eyes of me stripping and rubbing my breasts against those hard muscles. I bit my lip to keep back a groan, and I grinned when he relaxed beneath my fingers; he was like putty in my hands.

"You're much better than Constance," he whispered.

My reply was in a tone deeper than normal. “Thanks.” All good things must come to an end, and he’d grow suspicious if I kept rubbing him for the rest of the day. I finished the last of the creases and patted him on the back. “All done.”

“Thanks.” I slid off the jacuzzi and watched him lather the front of himself. Unfortunately, that was soon done and he stood. “Now the clothes.” I had a giddy moment of undressing him with no intention of redressing him, but that wasn’t his meaning. He donned the same dark trench coat and fedora hat I’d first seen him in, and stretched out his arms before me. “What do you think?”

“I think you have some serious problems,” I told him.

He chuckled and dropped his arms. “I’m aware of that.”

“So what happens if you don’t make all these battle preparations?”

“Then the sun wins the battle and I’m laid up for a few days with severe burns,” he replied.

I cringed. “Ouch. But this will help you avoid that misery, right?”

“Perfectly,” he assured me. “Now I’ll show you the grounds.”

Benson led me downstairs and down the hall away from the front door. He stopped in front of a door on our right. “This is my office. Care to have a look now or later?”

“Later. If we wait too long you may melt in that coat and there’ll be nothing but a pile of sunblock left,” I teased him.

He smirked and led on through the back door and out onto a large porch. It covered the entire back of the house, and there was a roof over us that slanted down to a large field of green grass that stopped at the edge of the corn and wheat fields around the property. Clumps of trees provided shade, and each one had their own bench that wrapped around the trunk. A winding path of gravel led from one bench to the other.

“It’s simple, but I don’t need much else but shade,” he explained to me.

“It’s a heck of a lot better view than what I have,” I replied.

He raised an eyebrow. “What’s the view like from your windows?”

“A bunch of other dingy apartment buildings with a fine view of a street corner frequented by prostitutes.”

Benson cringed. “Any hope through those windows?”

I shrugged. “I see a lot of pigeons demanding food, but the alley cats usually scare them away.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“It’s home.”

“Are you sure you won’t reconsider moving in temporarily with me?”
he persisted.

I shook my head. “I’d only have to go back to my apartment in a week, anyway.”

“You’re so sure of that outcome.”

“I’m just being pessimistic. Leads to less disappointment that way,” I countered.

He smiled, but there wasn’t any warmth in it. “That just hides the disappointment. You can never really escape your hopes and dreams.”

I didn’t like this mood; it put a cloud over us that warned of rain from my eyes. I gently pushed my shoulder up against his and smiled. “So is your profession as a philosopher or a businessman?”

Benson chuckled. “A little of both, but since the philosophy won’t support me I’m forced to be a businessman.”

I stepped out onto the green grass and glanced back at the fine old house; it didn’t look so creepy from the back. Maybe I could convince him to turn it around. “Judging by the house I’d say you were pretty good at it.”

“When you have little else to do but sit inside all day you have to focus your mind on something other than the window,” he replied.

I noticed he still stood on the porch like a boy afraid to step his toes into water. I stepped up to the porch and held out my hand. “Come on, you need your walkies.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is this how you treat all your employers?”

“If I can get away with it.”

“And you believe you can with me?”

“What are you going to do, fire me?”

“Good point.”

Benson took my hand and I pulled him out into the sun. “See? Not melting or bursting into flames,” I pointed out.

“You’re not the one wearing the heavy coat,” he countered.

“Then let’s take a short walk over to that shade tree, fill up your tank of coolness and get to the next one.” I yanked him along by his hand, and he followed with a laugh and a good step. He wasn’t an invalid, just cautious about his archenemy, the sun. We reached the first bench, but neither of us sat down. Benson stood at the edge of the shade and looked out on the sunlight; his eyes had a sad look to them. “How long have you been like this?”

“All my life. It’s a genetic condition where the sun causes blisters and severe itching.”

I couldn’t imagine living with such a terrible ailment. “And the only things that protect you are clothes and that sunscreen?”

“And even the sunscreen is a prescription. Anything over the counter is too weak to work,” he replied. “The reason for my weakness yesterday was I was recovering from overexposure. Constance was in a terrible mood and refused to assist in the application.”

Sievers had to be lesbian; that was the only way she could have refused to perform that delicious duty. “Ouch. So if you stay out of sunlight you’re fine?”

“Perfectly.”

“No wonder you don’t believe the day exists before noon. You must be a hell of a night owl,” I remarked.

He nodded. “Yes, I like to take walks and roam the garden.”

I glanced up at the sky; the sun was really bright today. “Don’t you think you should go inside? I mean, you don’t really need to show me around the place, and I’m sure you have some sort of secretary duties you want me to do.”

“I treat my secretaries as companions, in a platonic fashion,” he assured me. I squashed down the disappointment. “That is why I couldn’t give you firm hours when you asked for them.”

“You’d probably be better with a male companion. We women can be pretty bitchy,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but they keep me in line,” he countered. “Though I admit I have turned away several who displeased me beyond even my patience.”

“Like Miss Sievers?” I guessed, and he nodded.

“Yes. She had been with me for five years, and had come to believe she was the employer rather than me.” He sighed and shook his head. “I must admit I’m not sure what I’ll do without her. She was my chauffeur and manager.”

I smirked when a realization hit me. “So that explains how you came to the diner. You were lost because she wasn’t driving you.”

He sheepishly smiled. “Perfectly and utterly lost.”

The earth was ending; a man admitted that he wasn’t the map. “It takes quite a man to admit he was lost. You’ve got a lot of guts just going out on your own in your condition.”

He shrugged. “I needed a refill of my sunscreen, and I dislike having an unfinished chore at the end of the day.”

“And you sure did pick a day to do it!” I laughed, remembered that wild storm.

Benson smiled. “Perhaps it was fate that brought us together.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it was one hell of a lightning storm,” I countered. I glanced at my watch and sighed. “If we’re going to finish our little walk before that phone call we’re going to have to start moving.”

I dragged him along and he explained to me all the types of trees that stood in the yard and the flowers that sometimes edged the path. It was all riveting stuff for a botanist, but I was just a simple diner waitress and was glad when we wound our way back to the house. He looked glad to get out of the sun, and take off his heavy coat and hat on the porch. We stood there for a few quiet moments and enjoyed the coolness of the shade. “I must have bored you a great deal to make you so quiet.”

“You don’t pay me to talk, do you?” I wondered.

“I don’t believe we discussed money at all for this experiment. I can pay you the full salary if that’s what you want,” he offered.

“If you really want to.” I couldn’t turn down easy money.

He grinned. “Would a very nice salary guarantee your staying here?”

I shrugged and crossed my arms over my chest. “That depends on whether I like it here or not. You could pay me all the money in the world, but if I’m not happy I won’t stay.”

“Then you’re happy working at that diner?” he wondered in surprise.

“I’m comfortable with what I do and the boss won’t dare fire me. He knows the place would blow up if I wasn’t around to keep Sheila from accidentally turning on the kitchen stoves.” I looked him up and down, and grinned. “Besides, you meet some pretty interesting people at those places.”

He glanced down at himself. “At least unusual, but I see on your watch that it’s almost time for my meeting. If you don’t mind I’d like to be alone during the phone conversation.”

My prayers were answered; I wouldn’t be bored to tears listening in on a stodgy business meeting. “That’s all right, I’ll just look around the house. If you don’t see me in an hour send in a rescue party.”

“I promise to lead the party myself.” Benson surprised me by lifting my hand to his lips and planting a soft, warm kiss on my skin. “Adieu for now, my Angel.”

I stuttered out a nonsensical reply and he left me for his business. I didn’t recover from the shock for a few minutes, and when I did I found my face was beet-red and the hand he’d kissed shook. I pressed it against my chest and fervently shook my head; I had to snap out of this schoolgirl attitude. He was just fond of me for being so nice to him, that’s all. The poor fellow probably hadn’t had a conversation with a stranger in years.

I opted to stay out of the creaky old house to keep from interrupting, or becoming a participant in, the phone meeting. Instead I wandered around

the side of the house and came out at the circular driveway. At that moment I heard wheels on the gravel and saw a fancy black car pull up behind mine. A tall man of forty-five with gray-swept hair and a fancy suit stepped out. He frowned first at my car, and then at me when he noticed where I stood beside the front porch. "Hello there," he called out to me.

"Hi," I called back, and stepped out of the shadows of the house to greet him. I was Benson's secretary, after all; you couldn't spell secretary without security. Well, actually you could, but I felt a little possessive of my employer. He was a nice guy, after all. Yeah, that's it... "Can I help you?"

"I wanted to know if it was true that Constance Sievers quit this morning," he wondered. He was giving me a careful look-over that made me slightly hostile to him.

"I'm not sure what happened, but Mr. Benson is in a phone meeting and can't talk right now. If you'd like to leave a message with me I can give it to him," I assured him. I felt so grown-up talking to the guy like that; it almost made me squeal.

He firmly shook his head and shot down my self-importance. "If it's true that Miss Sievers is no longer in his employ then I must see who is."

"Well, I'm kind of in his employ right now," I replied.

The man blinked in bewilderment. "You?" He leaned his tall frame toward me and I leaned my short one back. "How old are you, Miss-?"

"Calhoun." And old enough to know he was invading my personal space.

"What is your age, Miss Calhoun?" he rephrased the question.

"Astral or physical?" I countered.

The poor man had another look of confusion on his face. "Astral?" he repeated.

"Yes. In a past life I was a three-legged dog."

"Cecil!" a voice cried from the porch, breaking off our weird conversation. Our heads snapped over to the front door and we saw Benson

standing at the edge of the steps just out of the sunlight. He didn't look happy to see the man named Cecil. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Cecil straightened, and frowned at Benson. "I was informed by the secretarial service that Miss Sievers had quit her job."

"Not quit, fired," Benson corrected him. "And I won't need you to find me another. This woman here will suit me perfectly."

Poor befuddled Cecil whipped his head between us, and pointed an accusatory finger at me. "This girl? You wish to have this girl as your secretary?"

"Why not? If she's been talking to you for a few minutes she must have some spunk," Benson pointed out.

I puffed up at the praise; Cecil withered me again with his glare, and he shot one at Benson so murderous I don't know how the bullet deflected off him; it must have been his stoic manner. "We must have a discussion immediately," Cecil demanded.

Benson stepped aside and swept his arm toward the open door. Cecil stomped in, and Benson turned to me. "You can stay out here if you wish, or come inside and explore the house."

"Explore the house, I think Cecil just wilted all the flowers out here," I quipped.

Benson followed me inside, and led Cecil into the study. I was curious to know what was going to happen to my now-precarious position, and snuck down the passage. The idea to hide on the other side of the door was nixed when I remembered what Benson had done to Sievers' eavesdropping; I wouldn't make the same mistake. The old walls of that house were thin, so I tiptoed into the living room, wincing at every creak beneath my feet, and stuck my ear against the wall that separated that room from the study. Their voices came through like they were standing on the other side of a paper-thin wall, which they were.

"That was quite a show, Cecil. Did you mean to scare the girl half to death?" I heard Benson ask his guest.

"If she scared that easily than she didn't deserve to be your secretary," Cecil laughed. My hands balled into fists; now I saw Cecil's game. He'd been testing me with that gruff attitude. "Why did you pick this one?"

There was hesitation from Benson. "She was kind to me," he finally explained

Cecil scoffed. "It's a good thing you don't get out much. You'd find many women would be kind to you if they knew who you were. Did she know who you were and how much money you had before you took her on?"

“I don’t think so, but that hardly matters now. She’s been hired.”

“I beg to differ, it matters most especially now that she’s been hired,” Cecil argued. “She may ingratiate herself with you to acquire your money.”

“Like Constance?” Benson bitterly replied. “She tried very well to ingratiate herself with me, and when she saw I was having none of it she became belligerent.”

“And that’s when she quit,” Cecil finished.

“That’s when I *fired* her. If she’s saying otherwise then she’s lying,” Benson shot back.

Cecil sighed; it was great enough to be a category one hurricane force wind. “She was only with you for a year, John. You’re getting worse,” Cecil scolded.

“*They’re* getting worse,” Benson countered. “And at least with this new girl I won’t be dealing with that agency. Nothing but worthless, greedy women who take me on to get at my money.”

“Perhaps like this girl. Do you know anything about her? What’s her name?” Cecil asked him.

“Didn’t she tell you?”

“She said Calhoun, but didn’t give me a first name.”

“Her first name is, well...”

“You don’t know it, do you?”

“I haven’t asked yet,” Benson briskly replied.

Another exasperated sigh from Cecil. “That’s quite an achievement considering you’ve already hired her for a position as your personal secretary. What do you call her, Girl?”

“That’s none of your business, and it never should have been. You were my guardian until I was twenty-one, but no more,” Benson replied. “My business is now solely my business.”

“I only mean well for my only nephew,” Cecil insisted. I cringed; what an uncle. “And as your nearest living relative I only want you to be happy.”

“Then stop bothering me!” Benson bellowed out.

I was startled by his outburst and jumped away from the wall. My shoulder knocked against the wallpaper and made a thud sound through the hollow partition. The voices in the other room quieted. “Did you hear something?” Cecil asked Benson.

I crept as quickly as I could out of the living room, but the hurried footsteps of my boss crossed down the hall and caught me before I could slip to the other side of the house. He grabbed my wrist in a painful grip and twisted me around. Those bright blue eyes were flames of anger that melted my courage. He shook me hard enough to jolt my marbles loose. “What are you doing? Were you listening in on us?” I meekly nodded my head; I was never a good liar. “Why?”

“I-I just wanted to see what would happen to my job.” Cecil came up behind Benson, and I nodded at him. “He said he didn’t want me around, so I thought you’d get rid of me.” Then my dream of supporting myself through college would end and I’d be forced to live with my mother, or get a dull butter knife from my apartment and commit seppuku; I was leaning toward the butter knife.

Benson turned his sharp eyes on Cecil, who was surprised to see the look aimed at him. “If you hadn’t scared her she wouldn’t have been listening at us.”

Cecil raised an eyebrow. “You think so?”

“Yes,” Benson firmly responded.

Uncle Cecil was taken aback by Benson’s quick reply. He glanced between us, me still wiggling and quivering in Benson’s strong grasp. The pale man was stronger than he looked, even with all the muscles I’d seen. A smirk curled onto Cecil’s lips. “I see.”

Benson didn’t like that look; neither did I. There was a hint of lecherousness in it. “What do you see?” Benson asked him.

“I see that I shouldn’t be intruding any longer,” Cecil added. He stepped back and gave us both a deep bow. “I can see three’s a crowd in this house, and wish you, Benson, happy hunting.”

I was perplexed by his dramatic change in attitude and Benson was angry, but Cecil swept outside before either of us could stop him. We raced onto the porch and were in time to see Cecil drive by the front of the house and wave to us. I weakly waved back, but Benson scowled at his uncle long after the car had driven out of sight. I glanced over to him. “Any idea what he was talking about just now?”

“Just the foolish prattle of an old man...” Benson grumbled. He stomped back inside and I scampered after him. He strode down the hall to the study, and I took it as a good sign when he didn’t slam the door in my face. Instead I followed him inside and found myself surrounded by old shelves full of older books. There was a large desk opposite the door that sat in front of large paned windows. They were covered in thick black cloth, but that didn’t dampen the effect of their size behind the person who sat behind the desk. There was also a world globe so large I could have set myself on its top and spun around; I promised myself a ride on it later if I wasn’t fired on the spot.

“I’m really sorry about eavesdropping on you. I didn’t mean to do any harm,” I apologized.

Benson plopped down into his large leather chair and sighed; he gestured to the one opposite him on the other side of the desk. I gulped big enough to swallow a small lake and sat down. “How much did you overhear?” he asked me. I couldn’t tell if he was angry, annoyed, or constipated.

I sank down into the chair. “Everything?” I squeaked out.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at me for several minutes without speaking. The wheels behind those sky-blue eyes turned as he decided my fate; to toss my curious ass out or not to toss my curious ass out. Finally he

sighed and ran his hand down his face. "What trouble these last few days have been..." he murmured to himself.

"You're telling me," I quipped.

Benson glanced up at me through his fingers and raised an eyebrow. "I do wonder after that transgression how much I can tell you, Angel," he countered.

My heart sank to the bottom of the Marianas Trench; I hated disappointing people when it really was my fault. "I'm sorry, I really am. I was just so worried about losing this job and my college bills that I guess I just-"

"You go to college?" he interrupted me.

Apparently I'd forgotten to mention that part to him. "Yes."

He was surprised and pleased by this information; he wouldn't have been if he knew my grades and debt. "What subjects are you studying?"

"Geology. Some guy gave me a rock one time for Halloween instead of candy, and I thought it was pretty cool so I've been interested in them ever since," I replied.

"That must be difficult to manage, the work at the diner and your classes," he wondered.

I shrugged. "I get along." For now.

"Is that why you accepted my offer of a position? To help pay for your college?" he asked me.

I sheepishly smiled. "Maybe?" He smiled and looked at me with newfound admiration; I had to keep my grades hidden from him, but first I needed a final answer to the question of my job. "Before I spill out my life story, could you tell me if I still have a job here?"

"That would entirely be up to you," he enigmatically replied.

"So does that mean I get to write out my own paychecks?" I guessed. Benson smirked, and shook his head. I shrugged. "You can't blame a girl for trying."

“I could, but I won’t,” he promised. “As for the matter of your position, you still hold it.”

All the weight of uncertainty fell off my shoulders along with my propriety. I jumped out of my chair and dove around the desk to give him a big hug. He stiffened for just a second and then relaxed in my arms. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” I chanted. “Now I don’t have to commit seppuku!”

“Seppuku?” he repeated in bewilderment.

I stepped back and shrugged. “It was either that or go live with my mom again.”

“You have a parent? Only one?” he asked me.

“And a dad, but my parents divorced a few years back so I don’t see him much,” I told him.

“My Angel has a more unusual life than I thought...” he murmured.

I shook my head. “Nope, it’s just your average-everyday-trying-to-live-by-the-skin-of-your-teeth kind of life.”

Benson leaned back in his chair and pondered me; science did that, too, but hadn’t come up with an answer yet. “I wouldn’t know much about that, but perhaps that’s one of the reasons I need to keep you around,” he replied.

“I could tell you stuff, but if you really want to know about people you’re going to have to go out and meet them,” I pointed out.

He firmly shook his head. “That’s not possible, not in my condition.”

I rejected his argument and substituted my own. “You get along just fine with all that covering, so why don’t you-”

Benson slammed his fist down against the top of the desk. I jumped high enough to feel the ceiling brush against my head, and came back down rattled. “We will not discuss that any further. I will not leave this house except for business and health, do you understand?” I nodded my head; he’d scared the talk out of me. Benson saw the fear in my eyes and sighed.

“I’m sorry, but getting out isn’t an option. My secretaries are my link to the outside world. That is their greatest asset to me.”

I folded my arms across my chest and frowned at him. “Makes me feel like a phone operator trying to connect you through a long-distance call to reality.”

“However you feel it must be this way.” He stood and towered over me; for the first time I was reminded that he was my boss and I the lowly employee. “I won’t be stared at like an animal at a zoo.”

He marched out of the room, leaving me feeling very foolish. I’d already forgotten how he looked, and how Sheila had reacted to him when he’d come into the diner. A lot of other people would react the same way, and no amount of sunblock could block their curiosity for his strangeness. I furrowed my brow and straightened my spine, but winced when it cracked. My new goal in life, behind finishing college and scuba-diving off Hawaii, was to try to get this man out of his white-skinned shell. Judging by his outburst it wasn’t going to be easy, but I knew my SSD would come through for me; stubbornness, stupidity, and determination.

All I needed now was a plan. I thought long and hard for all of two minutes, gave up and figured I’d think of something. For now I needed to find where my boss had stomped off to. I found him upstairs in his bedroom pacing the floor; if he’d kept it up he would have come to me in the study. “So, um, that phone meeting you had must have been really short.” He’d been quick to appear and greet Cecil.

He waved aside my question with a flip of his hand. “The signal was bad. He’ll call back later,” he briskly replied.

“And you don’t have anything else to do until four, so what would you like me to do?”

Benson stopped pacing and gestured to a chair close beside his walking path. “Sit.”

“Woof? I mean, what?” I asked him.

“I want you to sit down and tell me about yourself. Surely you remember the conversation between Cecil and myself. It made me realize how little I know about you. Now I want to know about you,” he replied.

“All right, but I hope you’re taking notes here. I plan on writing my autobiography someday, so I may as well start now.” I slid into the chair and he stood in front of me.

“First off, what is your name?” he asked me.

“Trixie.”

“Trixie?”

“Yeah, like the cereal but with more eek to it,” I quipped.

“So your full name is Trixie Calhoun?” he wondered.

I smirked and nodded. “Yep. My mother wanted a name nobody would forget.”

“And raised a daughter very much like the name...” he murmured.

I frowned. “You murmur to yourself a lot. Didn’t you have somebody to talk to other than yourself? What about your previous secretaries? Were they mutes?”

He chuckled; I was glad to see he still had his humor. “No, but some of them believed a barrier existed between an employer and their employee, and idle chat was never to be commenced.”

“Um, yeah, no. That just isn’t going to work for me,” I objected.

“I can see that,” he smirked. “You seem to be a very extroverted, personal sort of person.”

“And I’m friendly, too,” I added.

“It stands out, but I don’t believe we’re getting very far with your autobiography. Where were you born?”

As much as I loved the topic of the conversation, this wasn’t getting me any closer to my life goal of helping out this introvert. Therefore, I decided to be a hostile witness to my own life. “At my place of birth.”

“Obviously, but what city? Do you have any parents?”

“It takes two to tango,” I reminded him.

He was already exasperated; I had to avoid a meltdown of frustration or he wouldn’t open up to me. Instead there’d be an atomic explosion of boss proportions. “Do you have any siblings?”

“That’s enough about me, let’s talk about you.” I didn’t give him a chance to object before I swooped on top of him and switched our places. He sat in the chair and I lorded over both him and the conversation. “Now answer all the questions I just did.”

“But you didn’t answer any of them.”

“No excuses, just the facts.”

“Fifteen miles away, yes, no.” That backfired in my face.

“On second thought, just tell me everything you can remember.”

“That’s a lot of story. I’ve lived a long life,” he playfully countered.

“Start the same place as the Bible, at the beginning,” I suggested.

“I was born sickly, my mother died in childbirth, I was raised by my father until he died when I was ten, and then I was taken in by Cecil, my mother’s brother.” The facts blew past me so fast my hair stuck out the back.

“Well, that was oddly specific and yet not very helpful,” I told him.

He shrugged, but there was a smile on his face. “Turnabout is fair play.” So I cheated and held up his wallet. His face fell faster than a cartoon anvil out of a plane. He jumped up and clapped his hand over his nice ass. “When? Where? How?” he stuttered.

“Elementary, my dear boss. I swiped it when we traded places.” If there was one thing I learned at a dingy diner was that there were thieves who frequented the place to get at tired customers. I had to learn to grab back the wallets and purses they swiped because the brazen thieves were never going to admit to taking it; not when their livelihood and reputations were at stake. I opened the wallet and looked at the contents. “A driver’s license telling me you’re thirty, a few crisp one hundred dollar bills, some-”

“Give that back!” He jumped at me, but I swung to the side and avoided his clawing hands.

“-some credit cards, and a folded piece of paper.” He stole back the wallet, but I’d already plucked the folded paper out of the container. “And a-” I stopped cold when I saw a child’s crayon drawing of a ghostly stick-man with sharp fangs. Beneath the picture was written the word ‘monster.’ Benson snatched the drawing from me and stuffed it into his pants pocket. “Why...why do you have that?” I asked him.

His face was tense and his voice was strained. “To remind me why I shouldn’t go out,” he replied.

“Because people will make fun of you?” His reply was to turn away from me. I folded my arms across my chest and frowned at him. “Come on, that’s really childish.”

Benson’s head snapped back, and I wish it hadn’t. Those bright blue eyes revealed a deep, bitter anger beneath the surface of his calm demeanor. “Try being on the receiving end of fear from every new person you meet. They whisper and gossip about you because of your appearance, and shun you for the same. Everyone is the same.”

Since I was ‘everyone’ I took offense at his whining. “But I’m not like that. I’m not afraid of you,” I insisted. I nodded at his pocket. “And you’re the one keeping that around in your pocket. Nobody else is making you look at that picture and keeping you out of sight of everyone. Of course the less they see you the more they’re going to be afraid of you. What else are you expecting?”

“Humanity. Dignity,” he snapped back.

“You’re going to have to earn that from the strangers you meet, not expect them to greet you with open arms and chocolate.”

“I don’t like chocolate,” he told me.

I threw my arms up in frustration. “Fine, expect everyone to greet you with open arms filled with torches and pitchforks, but don’t blame anybody

but yourself. You're the one keeping yourself shut up in this musty old house, and when you die alone and bitter you're going to be just as musty and old."

Benson plopped back down in the chair and sullenly glared at me. "So everything is my fault?" he bit back.

I frowned back. "No, just all of the decisions you make in your life, including shutting yourself in here," I replied.

He sighed and all the fight went out with the air. His shoulders slumped and he ran his hand through his hair. "What did you say your major was?"

"Geology."

Benson scoffed. "Perhaps you should go into psychology."

I wrinkled my nose. "No, it'd be too tempting for everyone else."

He raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"They'd want to study me for their cases in abnormal psychology," I joked.

That cracked a smile on his stoic face. "But think how much science is missing from your not taking psychology."

"Science may be missing something, but I know I'm not. I'll take rocks any day over being a lab rat or working with one," I countered. "Now back onto the subject that's most important, which is your mental health."

Benson gave me a pensive, careful glance. "You seem to have a strange fixation with my mental well-being. Why?"

I shrugged. "New life goal."

That surprised him. "To help me?"

"To help you help yourself, and I've only got a week to do it," I replied.

He raised both eyebrows. "So you're staying?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"

"My outburst didn't startle you?" he wondered.

I rolled my eyes, walked over to him and leaned an elbow on his shoulder. "If you think that's scary you should see when a trucker fights a

trucker. That's a whole lot of testosterone duking it out in a tiny diner, and other people usually get mad at their meals being spilled and join in."

He smirked. "Sounds exciting."

"Yeah, until you have to beat them off the counter with a tray and clean up the mess afterward," I pointed out. "But enough talking, let's go for a walk."

"I'd rather not."

"Come on, we have a few hours before work." I grabbed his hand and gave a playful tug on his arm. He glared up at me and I performed my best puppy-dog look. Fortunately it didn't scare him; he actually smiled.

"Fine, but not for long. I have my weights to do after the walk."

Preparing my boss for his walk reminded me of getting a kid ready to go outside and play in the snow. There was always that time where they were all ready to go and needed to go the bathroom. That wasn't quite the case here; instead there was a heavy knock on the door as we were walking downstairs. Benson turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "Are you expecting anyone?"

My jaw dropped open and I gestured around us. "Does this look like my home?"

"It would be if you agreed to stay for the week," he countered. The visitor knocked against the door, this time with their fist.

"Better answer that before they knock down the whole place," I quipped.

Benson strode to the door and opened it to find a small bespectacled man on the doorstep who looked to be the age of dirt. He had a cane in one hand and he wore a clean suit that matched his skin; both were wrinkled. My employer's face dropped faster than a cannonball out a window. "Mr. Carlyle," Benson greeted the man.

Carlyle pushed past him with all the speed of a turtle, along with the grace. "I heard you lost your girl again. What was wrong with this one?"

Benson rolled his eyes. “She didn’t suit me, sir, and I’ve found a better replacement.”

The old man noticed me and pointed the end of his stick at me. “Is this her?” Carlyle asked in a tone that showed he didn’t think much of me. I didn’t think much of him, and neither did my boss.

“It is,” Benson replied through clenched teeth.

“Couldn’t you have found someone older than eighteen? Are you sure she’s even legally allowed to be employed?” he spat out.

Benson stepped in front of Carlyle and glared at the old man. “Sir, I appreciate your kindness in seeing me, but I assure you I have this matter under control.”

“Nonsense, boy. Your father left you in my care for a reason, and I won’t let up on my duty,” Carlyle countered. “And that duty means making sure you’re around the right sort of people.” Judging from his few acquaintances that list must have been pretty short.

“I’m perfectly fine, sir, now if you’ll excuse-”

“Perfectly fine?” Carlyle asked. He prodded the end of his cane into Benson’s chest. I was glad to see the old man bounced back from the solid muscles. “Just look at yourself in a mirror.”

“I try not to...” Benson grumbled. That explained the lack of mirrors in the place.

“What’s that?” Carlyle asked as he cupped his hand against his ear.

“I said we were just going out and can’t speak with you,” Benson replied in a louder voice.

Carlyle waved away Benson’s excuse with his empty hand. “Nonsense about going out, not when it’s so sunny. Besides, we have matters to discuss and another secretary to find.” He toddled off to the living room without giving Benson time to argue.

The poor man turned to me with an apologetic smile. “I can’t apologize enough for his behavior,” Benson told me.

I glanced over his shoulder at the living room. "You can start by telling me who he is."

"One of my father's old friends who has taken it upon himself to be my guardian," he replied.

"But I thought your uncle was your guardian."

"He is, legally, but Carlyle has made it his duty to be my guardian in duty, if not in title."

"So he's a busybody who wants to run your life?" I guessed.

"Exactly."

"What's taking you, John? I'll die at the rate you're going," Carlyle called from the living room.

Benson glanced heavenward. "If only," he whispered.

"Did you want me to come with you? I might annoy him enough he'll leave," I suggested.

A bright grin lit up his face, and he offered his arm to me. "I won't be able to find any way to thank you enough."

I took his arm and sweetly smiled at him. "What are friends for?"

Benson led me into the living room, and Carlyle wasn't happy to see both of us. He pointed that cane at me; I wished I could grab it and chuck it out the front door with him close behind. "What's she doing here? Get her out of here!"

"She has a right to hear why you object to her," Benson countered. At that moment we both heard a ring from the study. He worriedly glanced down at me, but I smiled and shook my head.

"I'll be fine," I whispered to him.

"What was that?" Carlyle cried out.

"There's a phone call I need to take. I'll be right back," Benson replied. He hurried from the room, leaving me with grumpy gramps. To show how firm I was in staying, I sat down on the couch beside the chair Carlyle inhabited.

The old man fumed, and his cane shook with the fury of a thousand jello jiggers. “Someone that young being a private secretary for a Benson? I won’t stand for it!”

I tried to keep a serious face. “If it’s just my age you don’t like I’m getting older every day,” I quipped.

Carlyle glared at me. “You’re only here for the money, just like all the others he’s met, aren’t you?”

I straightened and scowled straight back. “I haven’t seen a dime of his money.” It was true; his wallet only had the large bills and some pennies.

“What lies have you told him to get on his good side, hmm? Told him a sob story no decent man like him could ignore and he took you in on his kindness?”

This man was really getting on my nerves, and I hoped that Benson would return soon; he’d been gone only a few minutes that were stretching out into eons. “I don’t have a sob story, just mine,” I snapped back.

His withered lips curled up in a sneer, and he leaned forward so his spittle sprayed all over me; an umbrella would’ve been really handy right then. “I know what kind of woman you are, trying to get at his fortune, and I won’t let you do it even if I have to knock some sense into John myself.” I glanced at his thin frame; he didn’t look like he could knock down a bowling pin.

“I think Mr. Benson’s old enough to take care of himself,” I countered.

“You would like that, wouldn’t you? For his friends and family to leave him alone to you.” Carlyle glanced over me, and I shuddered beneath those cold, heartless eyes. I’d seen eyes like those in the stingiest, meanest customers at the diner, the ones who complained about everything and reveled in your pain as you tried to please them. There was no pleasing this man. This man knew how to hurt people, he’d had a lot of practice, and now he was going to put that practice to use on me. “Your story probably involved a family. Do you have a real one?”

“That’s personal information,” I refused.

His sneer lengthened; he resembled a snake. “That means yes. How would you like it if I made your family very uncomfortable? Hmm?” He inched along to the edge of his chair, and I inched back away from him until he caught my wrist. His hands were as cold as his heart, and not nearly as shriveled. “Everyone has secrets, and I’m a finder of secrets. I keep them, too, but only if I have a use for keeping them.”

“Don’t you dare touch my family,” I hissed at him.

He chuckled, tossed my arm toward me, and leaned back comfortably in his chair. “Then leave. Take whatever plans you have for John and leave this house.” I hesitated; a dark cloud passed over his brow. “Leave *now*.”

I gave him one last look of disgust before I stalked out of the room with tears in my eyes. Benson caught me in the hall. I tried to escape to the refuge of the kitchen, but he grabbed my shoulders and turned me toward him. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?” he asked me. I shook my head; this wasn’t his fight. Unfortunately, he thought differently, and his eyes filled with rage. “What did he say to you?”

“I-it’s nothing,” I choked out. I didn’t know whether to run for my car or fall into Benson’s arms.

“Nothing my ass. What did he say?”

“He said...he said he knew what I was and he intended to harass my family if I didn’t leave,” I told him.

Benson’s hands on my shoulders shook, and his grip tightened so much that it hurt. “He said that?” he asked me through gritted teeth. I nodded. Benson let me go and stalked into the living room.

“There you are,” I heard Carlyle greet him. “I believe I just solved one of your-ah! What are you doing? Put me down!” the old man shrieked. The pair walked out into the hall, or rather Benson walked out carrying Carlyle by the armpits. The short man kicked and screamed. “Put me down right now, John! John!”

Benson stalked over to the front door, deftly handled the knob with his squirming load, and chucked Carlyle over the porch and out onto the gravel driveway. He stomped out onto the porch with me at his back. I was afraid the old demon had broken his back, but Carlyle staggered to his feet and shook his cane at both of us. "You fool! You'll be sorry you didn't listen to me!"

"And you'll be sorry you if don't listen to me and leave right now," Benson shot back.

Carlyle didn't listen; he hobbled up to the porch steps and shook his cane at Benson. "She'll ruin you! She'll steal all your money and you'll have no one to turn to but me!"

"I always have Cecil," Benson growled as he took a threatening step forward, but not off the porch. "Now get out of here!" The old man tottered back toward his car, yelling about Benson's ruined future. Carlyle drove off, and Benson turned to me with a triumphant smile on his face. It slipped off when he saw my head clutched in one hand. He hurried up to me and wrapped his hands gently around my upper arms. "Are you all right?"

I nodded, but those damn tears wouldn't go away. They kept sliding down my face. Benson led me inside, and I was still too torn between staying and going to fight. "Perhaps a stiff drink will work," he suggested as he led me to the kitchen.

I shook my head. "I don't drink."

He chuckled. "That's rare. Did you lie to me about being a college student?"

I took his joke seriously. "No, I swear I didn't lie to you about that, or anything else."

Benson set me against the island and got out two shot glasses. "I believe you," he quietly replied. He retrieved a stiff vodka from the cupboard and poured us both a drink in the glasses. He held out a glass to me. "Now come on, take this."

I pushed the glass away and wryly smiled. "I'm the designated driver for getting me home," I reminded him.

"You don't have to go home today. You could stay the night," he suggested.

"I...I can't." It was a tempting proposition; I didn't like driving.

"Why not? Do you have your college books here?"

"In my car," I replied.

"Any pets waiting for you at your apartment?" I shook my head. "Then why?"

I shrugged. "It's just that this isn't going to last, so I shouldn't get used to any of it."

His eyes took on a hurt expression, and his voice was quiet. "Not even me?" he wondered.

I sighed. "That isn't a fair question," I argued.

Benson set the glass down and turned me so I faced him. He raised his hand and brushed a finger against my tear-soaked cheek. "It's the only question I want an answer to." I blushed under the intensity of those blue eyes and turned away, but he clasped my chin and pulled me back. I felt myself drowning in those pools of shimmering blue, and I didn't struggle to escape. "Can't we last longer than a week?"

"I-I don't know," I stuttered out. All I knew were those beautiful eyes, and his lips coming closer to mine. He brushed his nose softly against mine and inhaled my scent. His feral action sent a shiver down my spine, and heat up from between my legs.

He shuddered. "I want you, my little Angel," he whispered. His lips slid down my cheek and when they reached mine he pushed them together. His kiss was hot and demanding; he desperately wanted me. His hands slipped behind me and pulled our bodies against one another, and unconsciously I ground my hips into his. He grunted and meshed our lips harder together. My treasonous tongue slipped out and licked his lips. He opened his mouth

and our tongues dueled with his being the victor. I groaned, and the sound vibrated through both our bodies.

I didn't want this to end, but I needed air. I pushed us apart and gasped; air rushed back into my lungs, but I still felt lightheaded. That was from the heat built up inside me, the hormones that demanded I listen to the aching need between my legs and give into his commanding eyes. I couldn't; not then. I put my hands against his chest and pushed him away. "W-we can't," I breathed out. My voice sounded far more sultry than I intended.

Benson's face fell; the light dimmed in those wonderful eyes. I felt like I'd extinguished a shining star. "Why? Is it me?" He held up his pale hands between us. "Is it this?"

I smiled, placed my hands on top of his, and pushed them down. "You have perfectly nice fingers-" and I had no doubt they could work magic on my body, "-but it's *us*. It's what we are to each other."

He was confused. "And that is?"

"Employee and employer," I reminded him. "This type of relationship is-well, it's just not healthy for that setup. You know what I mean?"

Benson didn't look like he cared, but he sighed and nodded. "I see what you mean."

He turned his face away, but I smiled and gently guided it back to face me. "But if it's any consolation, you're one hell of a kisser."

Benson wryly smiled at me. "Can't you believe in love at first sight?"

I smiled. "Yeah, in Disney films and romance books, but not in my life." I noticed the time was almost four. "It looks like you need to be getting back to work, anyway, and I've got some homework to do at my apartment." I brushed past him, but he gently caught my arm. I turned to find myself staring into those beautiful sky-blue eyes.

"You'll come back, won't you?" He sounded so scared that I'd leave him and never come back, like a small boy being left by his mother for the first time.

I grinned and pinched his cheek. “Of course, silly. This is only day one.”

And what a day it had been.

I drove back to my apartment with my thoughts so filled with that kiss that I nearly had a jaywalker plastered against my windshield, which would have been bad because I didn't have any wiper fluid in my car. I shuffled into my home, greeted the cockroaches, and unpacked my books. That's when I found my phone, and realized I'd left it in the car the entire time I was at Benson's house.

I flipped it open and found five voice-mails in my inbox, all from my mother. I listened to them, each one more frantic than the next until she was threatening to murder me herself unless I called back. With those warnings I hesitantly called back. It barely got through the first ring before Mom picked it up. "Where the hell have you been!" she screeched in my ear.

I winced. "Working," I blandly replied.

Hell hath no fury like a mother worried. "That's no excuse for not answering my calls! Where the hell was your phone?"

"Um, in the car," I weakly explained to her.

There was an exasperated sigh so large I felt it through the phone receiver. "I thought you told me you always kept it with you."

"Well, it was with me in spirit," I joked.

She didn't laugh. "You keep that phone with you for as long as you're working for this strange man. You hear me?"

My hand that gripped the phone tightened. "I'm just fine, Mom. It's not like he's going to rape me." A little voice in my head hoped for ravishing, but I taped duct tape over its mouth to silence it.

"Don't even joke about that!" she yelled. "How much do you even know about this employer? What is he making you do?"

Her accusatory tone riled me, especially after how Benson stood up for me in dealing with Carlyle. "I'll have you know he's been a perfect gentleman, and he's agreed to pay me the entire time I'm working for him," I shot back.

That dampened her flames, but hot coals still lingered. "You just keep your eyes on him. These rich men think they can do anything they like because they have a fleet of lawyers to cover their asses."

I hoped a fleet of lawyers wouldn't cover his nice ass. "Mom, I'll be just fine. Besides, it's only for a week, remember? Then everything will go back to the way it was." Including me having to worry about college books and rent payment.

"We can only hope for as much." Mom sighed, and I could just imagine her rubbing the bridge of her nose. "But now that I know you're all right, I'm going to go lie down. Talk to you later, sweetie."

"Bye, Mom." I was relieved when the call ended.

I tossed the phone into my dingy chair and collapsed on the dingy couch. The ugly, water-stained ceiling greeted me, but I couldn't make pictures out of it today. The only image in my mind was of those bright blue eyes staring at me intensely. I reached up and lightly touched my lips; I could still feel the heat of his mouth against mine. Just thinking about that passionate kiss made me hot and needy. I could just imagine all those solid muscles on his chest pushing against me as he pinned me to his bed. Our grunts and groans would fill the air, and our hands would be all over each other, touching and caressing in our most sensitive spots. He'd take me and pound his thick, stiff manhood into me. I'd feel that stirring inside me; that

moment of fulfillment when my whole body shook with the rapture only he could give me.

I groaned and rolled onto my side; I had to stop thinking about that stuff. He was my boss, I was the hired help, and even that was only going to last a week; correction, six days. Day one was already over, and I'd learned that his family and old acquaintances were a few coins short of a full piggy bank, and that he was very much attracted to me.

"Come on, Trix, you know this isn't going to work," I muttered to myself. "He's a rich man and you're not any of those, so stop thinking about him."

My mind betrayed me by conjuring up images of him completely naked. My face flushed, and I grabbed a nearby pillow and stuffed it over my head. Damn my mind to hell in a hand basket. I had to get over this infatuation by tomorrow or things were going to be worse for me.

THE NEXT DAY I still wasn't quite over my I-love-my-boss mindset, and went to his house with dread mixed with schoolgirl glee. I knocked and he answered with a smile on his face. I nearly melted on the spot, but kept myself together by imagining my putty self in my strong mold of self-confidence and abstinence. "You don't have to knock. You work here now," he pointed out to me.

I shrugged. "It's still your house," I countered.

"Yes, I suppose so," he agreed. He stepped aside and I stepped inside.

"So what's on the agenda today?" I asked him.

He pulled out the little black book, and I looked over the details. There were more phone calls, and they were written in red ink. "This looks serious," I told him.

Benson sighed and gave a nod. "It is, but I hope to be laughing at myself tomorrow for worrying so much about it today."

I handed back the book. “So what do I need to do in these phone calls? Take your side of the conversation and make up my own story for the other line?” I teased him.

He smirked, and shook his head. “No, but that would be tempting to see what you would come up with.”

“Ah, you say that now, but you’ve never seen my creative stories,” I countered.

“Blood-chilling gore?” he guessed.

“Something far worse.”

“Suspenseful murders?”

“Even more deadly.”

He laughed. “I give up, what are your creative stories about?”

I leaned in toward him with my face a mask of fear and horror. “Sparkling unicorns.”

Benson blinked in bewilderment. “You’re joking.”

I grinned. “If I was joking I would have made a somebody-walks-into-a-bar joke.”

“Then you’re right, that would be terrifying and I don’t think I would want to read it.”

I sighed and shrugged. “Nobody knows the sufferings of a starving artist.”

He looked over my solid frame with no sign of this starvation I spoke of. “You’re right, a lot of people wouldn’t know it from looking at you.”

“Hardy-har-har,” I quipped. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“What was the question?”

“What am I supposed to do while you have all these phone conversations?”

He grinned; it was an evil, you’ll-regret-asking-that kind of grin. He gestured with his finger to follow him, and I obeyed him with all the humor

of a funeral march. He led me down the hall to the study and over to the desk, where sat a pile of paperwork in folders. "This is what you need to do."

I nervously glanced over the papers. "They need burning?"

Benson looked alarmed until he realized I was joking, which was only partly true. "Each of these folders have different assignments. Some you have to call and set up phone appointments between the person and myself, others are to arrange for purchases and sales of stock."

Now I was really nervous. "And your secretary is the one who's supposed to be doing this?"

"Yes."

"And if I make a mistake, will that cause the complete collapse of civilization as we know it?"

"No, and you won't lose my fortune, either," he comforted me. "I don't take big risks on the market, and if I did I would handle the transaction myself."

I relaxed enough to breathe, but not enough to keep wishing I was far away; like in Hawaii. Benson noticed my nervous demeanor and put his hand on the small of my back. I stiffened, and chuckled. "I'm sure you'll do just fine, but how about we go for a walk first?"

I gladly tossed down the papers in my hand. "Sure. I need the fresh air before I dig into this pile of chores."

We went upstairs to the bathroom for the usual lathering, but things were different than yesterday. I rubbed his back and drooled over his body, and my own responded with a deliciously annoying heat. His tall, muscled back tempted me with tantalizing images of us together, embraced and sliding against one another atop the sheets of his bed. I was glad to be seated behind him when my face took on a redder hue.

"You're taking a long time," he murmured. His sultry voice didn't help me, but my inner self squealed.

“I-I just want to be thorough, that’s all,” I replied. It wasn’t a lie, just not the complete truth. The full truth was I wanted to rip off my shirt and bra, and rub myself against his slick back. Before I could stop myself I’d let out a groan. We both stiffened, and the bathroom air turned a notch toward tense. I patted his back and stood. “All done!” I yelled louder than I meant to.

“Not quite,” he argued. He turned around and held the bottle out to me. “The front still needs some work.”

I gulped so deep my tonsil bounced off my feet. “I-I’m sure you’re better at this than I am. You know, practice makes perfect and stuff, so I’ll just go get your-”

“After that thorough job on my back I think you’re ready for the front,” he interrupted me.

I looked down at his smooth, glistening chest. My eyes wandered down farther than I meant and brushed over a certain bulge in his pants. He was affected as badly as me, and my rubbing him anymore wasn’t going to help either of us. “N-no, really, I’ll just-”

I turned to get at the door, but he grabbed me by the wrist and gently pulled me into his lap. My legs straddled his for the best position, and that plopped my heated spot right on top of his hard manhood. I put my hands on his firm chest and my face lit up like a ten-thousand watt Christmas bulb. “I-I don’t think this is a good idea,” I stuttered out.

His bright eyes caught my own, and when I shifted he shuddered. No matter how I moved I rubbed up against him, so I stiffened. “I-it’s all right,” he protested. “I won’t do anything you won’t like.”

That was the problem; I liked everything he did to me. His hands slid up my shirt and massaged my back while he leaned in and pressed soft, heated kisses along my neck. I leaned my head back to allow him a better angle, and bit my lip to repress a moan. “N-not good,” I whispered.

“You like it,” he softly teased me. Damn it, he was right. I was changing into a pile of malleable flesh, with him as the sculptor.

One of his hands undid the strap of my bra, and slid around to the front. He brushed away the loose bra and cupped my breast in his hand. His warm, gentle fingers squeezed and massaged my plump flesh, and I encouraged him by leaning into his touch. His caresses were like soft wisps of cool air on a warm summer day. They relaxed and invigorated me, and I found my hands wrapping themselves around the back of his neck and pulling him closer.

His hot lips left a blazing trail of heat up my neck until he captured my mouth in his breath-taking kisses. I ached all over for his touches and ground my hips into him. He grunted and broke off the kiss. His smoldering eyes looked into mine with a need that left me aching for more. “You’re making this very hard for me, Angel,” he teased.

I was about to make it a little harder. “And that’s why we need to stop,” I gasped.

His face fell faster than all my previous metaphors combined. “What? Why?”

“We can’t do this,” I told him.

He wasn’t angry, but he was frustrated. “Why not?” he hoarsely whispered.

“Because we’re in a bathroom,” I reminded him.

“We could-”

I pressed a finger to his lips and shook my head. “You could change the location and we’d still be boss and worker.”

He clasped my hand in his, and his eyes had a playful glint in them. “I could fire you right now and solve that problem.”

I had to admit that was really tempting, but that wouldn’t have solved my money problem. “I’d rather you didn’t. It would feel like we’re cheating.”

Benson sighed and his hard manhood deflated. “All right,” he agreed. He reluctantly let me go and I just as reluctantly slid off his lap.

I felt a wet, oily substance on my hands, and glanced down to see my arms up to my bare elbows were covered in sunscreen. “Oh damn.”

My comment startled him. “What? What’s wrong?”

I held up my glistening hands. “Mind if I use your bath for a few minutes?”

He raised a lecherous eyebrow and smirked. “Sure, but the price is we take one at the same time.” I opened my mouth to scold him, but he held up his hand and nodded. “I know, I know. I’ll behave and meet you downstairs with your work.”

“What about the walk?” I asked him.

He stiffly rose up; his hard-on wasn’t quite a soft-on yet. “Perhaps later after I’ve recovered from your bewitching spell.”

I won't bore us both to tears, me literally when I remember those first trying hours, about my on-the-job training. Benson was nice enough to guide me through the first few calls and tell me how to introduce myself as his new secretary, and then I was abandoned to the wolves of Wall Street while he made his own calls. I'll just say that things could have gone horribly worse, and sometimes I thought they had before I managed to stutter out what I wanted and for whom.

After three hours of work I stumbled out of the living room where Benson had put me so our conversations didn't drown out one another. I suspected he didn't want to see me break down at each call. His sharp ears caught my shuffling feet in the hall, and he found me in the kitchen drowning out my stress with a nice, tall glass of water. I caught him leaning against the doorway with his arms folded across his chest and a big grin on his face. "Tough time?" I nodded; my mouth was full of water. "What do they teach kids in college these days?"

I gave myself a big gulp of water before I replied. "How to drink and fall asleep in uncomfortable classroom chairs," I quipped.

"Anything I need to know about?"

"Yeah, one of the ladies said Mr. Somebody couldn't work with any of the times you gave me, so you needed to call him back at some number."

He looked alarmed at my lack of specific information, so I waved my hand toward the living room. "I wrote it down."

"In your shorthand?" he teased.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, but I translated it into English after I was done talking with his secretary," I assured him.

"And did you get through the pile or still need to earn the large salary I'm paying you?" he asked me.

"Got through, and I'll have to add on a stress tax," I replied.

He raised an eyebrow. "Stress tax? Sounds serious."

"And seriously expensive," I added. "It brings my daily fee up to, oh, about a million dollars."

Benson smirked. "Is that all?" He took out his wallet and thumbed through the bills. "Did you want to be paid daily or at the end of the week?"

I drooled at the sight of all those one hundred dollar bills flashing by beneath his thumb. "Whenever's good for you," I whispered.

He stopped his torturing of me, snapped shut the wallet and destroyed my dreams by stuffing the container back into his pocket. "Then I'll wait until the end of the week. That will ensure you stay here that long."

I glared at him. "That's a dirty trick."

He shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. "All's fair in love and wallet."

I faked outrage and insult. "Fine then, be that way. Is there anything else you might want, your Royal Highness?" The moment I saw the lecherous look cross his face I knew I'd made a terrible mistake. "Not that," I scolded him.

Benson sighed. "Then I having nothing more for you to do today, Angel."

I clapped my hands together. "That works great for me because I need to go to the library for some research."

"College students still go to the library?" he wondered.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, we’re not all Neanderthals,” I countered. He gave me a disbelieving look, and I hung my head. “All right, the professor is making us because he wants citations from real books and not Wikipedia.”

“The class must have been devastated to learn the news,” he mused with an evil smile.

“You’re telling me. I expected some of them to burst out crying because they had to leave their dorms to do it,” I quipped. I glanced at my watch; almost four. “But anyway, I’ll leave you to your exciting job on the phone and go to my exciting homework in the library.”

I whipped past him, but not fast enough to escape his hand that shot out. I turned and found him with a worried expression on his face. “Joking aside, if you want the money now I can pay you.”

I smiled and patted his hand before I removed it. “I’m sure I can survive for five more days,” I assured him. “And I’ll be back tomorrow, so don’t worry about that.”

He grinned and nodded. Then I was free to go to my gas-guzzler of a car and drive back to campus. The college was a decent-sized place of a couple city blocks, and that wasn’t including the dorms. Somebody had actually planned out this place and set the library in the middle of the campus to give easy access to all the degree workers. The library had three floors that were open to the public, and the fourth was closed off except with special permission. That floor held the dustiest and moldiest of the books, and thus they were the most expensive.

Thankfully I didn’t have any research that needed dusty books, and I wandered my way to the geology section on the second level. The floors of each level were slick linoleum except for the sitting areas with the tables. Those had carpets so the students couldn’t slide the chairs around the tables in races. Now they took the trays from the food places and pulled those along the grassy areas like sleds.

The floors were open in the center so being on the top floor you could look down over the railings to the other ones below it. The geology section ran along the balcony of the second floor, and like a studious student I went straight to it, but not without finding trouble on the way. The trouble was some rough-housing assholes whose brains were mush from all the alcohol. They decided the library with its maxes of bookshelves was the best place for a game of tag. I climbed the winding stairs that went straight up to all the levels, and collided with one of the players being chased by the tagger.

They zoomed past, but I lost not only my patience but my balance. My hands flailed for the stairs railing and missed, and I felt myself fall backward into the abyss of a fall with a broken neck at the finish line. I had an angel on my side in the form of a tall, husky figure who caught me on the fall back and saved me from a long drop with a quick stop. I glanced up at my savior, a handsome young man of twenty-two with short blond hair and a smile that dazzled me. "Easy there," he teased me as he righted me onto the second floor. "It's a hard floor at the bottom."

I shakily smiled and looked myself over for any bumps from the collision; everything was where it should have been. "I didn't really plan for a one-way trip down," I replied.

"It looks like it. You'd better sit down." He led me over to the tables and I collapsed in one of the hard chairs. He sat down opposite me. "You need me to get you anything?"

"No, but you can tell me your name so I know who to thank," I answered.

"It's Will Tanner. Now are you going to tell me who I just saved?"

I held out my hand. "I'm Trixie Calhoun." He gave my hand a good shake, though not any harder than I was still shaking from the near-death experience. "So what are you in for?" He stared at me blankly. "What are you majoring in?" I rephrased.

“Oh, the social sciences. You know, psychology and sociology,” he told me. I would run into a handsome guy who probably wanted to study me rather than date me. “And what’s yours?”

“Rocks, and I was going to be doing some boring research with them before that hit-and-run,” I replied.

He flashed that smile again. It was mesmerizing, like a certain pair of blue eyes. His physique was powerful, with strong, tanned muscles and tight-fitting clothing that showed off all his curves. His golden hair was even lighter from a lot of sun exposure, and he had an easy, friendly manner to him. I physically jolted myself from my thoughts; without realizing it, I had compared Will with Benson. Will was the complete opposite of Benson in his dashing, tanned body and outward demeanor, and he still had brains enough to be going to college.

“You’re looking me over like I’m your next meal,” he teased me.

I sheepishly grinned. “Sorry about that, just thinking about-well, about other stuff.”

He leaned across the table and dropped his voice. “I hope it’s some good other stuff.”

I blushed; this guy was really forward, but that wasn’t something I hated too much so long as he didn’t grab my ass like some of the customers at the diner. “Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn’t.”

He glanced at his watch and frowned. “I guess maybe we can find out later. I have to go to a study meeting with a friend.” He pulled out a folded slip of paper and handed it to me. “When you can pull yourself from your rock books, give me a call.” He left, and I opened the paper; it was his phone number and address. He lived off campus on a well-known party street, but then most of the streets were party streets if college students lived there.

I pocketed the paper and resumed my studies, but managed to get revenge on my would-be assassin. The idiot taggers were still playing a few

minutes later when I sat at the end of the table looking through some books. I saw them running down the tables toward me and recognized the attempted murderer. When he flew by my foot happened to slip out from beneath the table, and the guy went flying face-first into the rough, cheap, commercial rug on the floor. He slid for a yard and clutched his face in pain before he swung around and glared at me. His face was one long rug-rash, complete with little pebbles from the other students walking on it all day.

“What the hell did you do that for?” he screamed at me.

I put on my best confused expression. “What? I didn’t do anything. You tripped because you were running.”

My fake expression didn’t work; he scrambled to his feet and rushed me. I dove over the table in time to escape his clutches, and kicked some books back in his red face for good measure. He howled at the pain, but that didn’t stop him from running around the table after me. I wove in and out of the tables with my pursuer close at behind, but I had the upper hand. My body was nice and skinny, but his was bulky; he had a hard time squeezing between the people at the other tables, and by the time we’d gone past a half dozen tables he had a dozen people chasing him.

They tackled him and people came out of the bookcase woodwork to see what was the matter. Somebody tossed a chair, and the brawl began. I dodged chairs and stepped over overturned tables to snatch my bag and hightail it out of there. I heard later it was the biggest fight ever to take place in the library; even larger than the Great Computer Chair War of ‘08. I hurried home before the cops arrived, and was a good little girl for the rest of the evening.

“So have an exciting time at the library?” Benson asked me the next day.

I shrugged. “Not really. Just read some books, met a guy after an assassination attempt, and started a library-wide brawl that ended in three concussions, a lot of broken chairs, and even more broken fingers.” He blinked at me in bewilderment, and I shrugged. “All right, maybe I exaggerated the number of concussions, but the fight did spread to most of the floors of the library.”

“You met a guy?” he slowly repeated.

I rolled my eyes; that would be the one thing he’d pick up on. “Yeah, he caught me before I fell backwards on the stairs.”

“He must have left an impression on you to mention him,” he quietly commented.

“Well, he did save me from the floor making an impression on me,” I pointed out.

I noticed Benson was stiff. “No doubt good-looking.”

As evil as it sounds, I had a hard time not snickering; Benson was jealous. “I’m afraid so.”

“Tanned and intelligent?”

“Right on both accounts. He is a college student, after all.”

“That doesn’t imply intelligence,” he countered.

I folded my arms across my chest and frowned. “So what am I, chopped liver?”

“You’re my Angel, but today you need to be my chauffeur, too,” he replied.

“Your chauffeur?” I had to make sure I heard him right; he was actually going away from the house, and only for the second time since I’d met him.

He nodded. “Yes, I need to go to my business to attend a very important meeting.” He pulled out an address with directions. “This is where we need to go. Do you need any other instructions?”

I shook my head; I knew the city much better than the country. “Nope, this’ll work just fine. It’s just a few blocks from my campus.”

“Good. Let’s get me ready for the trip.”

We went through the sunblock ordeal, but he didn’t try to ravish me. I was disappointed, but he was distracted by this meeting and only wanted to hurry to the city. He dressed in his black attire and led me through the side door of the kitchen and under the thick canopy that led to the garage. Inside was a black car with the rear windows heavily tinted and a dividing glass between the front and the back. “We can communicate via intercom,” he explained to me.

“And here I thought I’d have to learn Morse code,” I teased. Things must have been serious because his stoic face didn’t crack a smile. He slid into the back and I slipped behind the wheel, noticing first that there was a tag over the rearview mirror that denoted a handicapped person on board. That must have been how he got away with having such darkly tinted windows.

I drove out of the garage and onward to victory, which in this case was not getting lost and stuck in traffic for an hour. I followed the instructions to the letter and we arrived at a broad, forty-story tall office building. I drove around back to a parking garage and found his spot; it was prime real estate

at the front closest to a side entrance of the building. I parked the car and, since I didn't know how to use the com system, knocked on the glass. "We're there," I called to him.

I heard his door open, and I hurriedly stepped out. With a briefcase in hand Benson looked like a real businessman, if a businessman was trying to imitate the invisible man. Without a word he led me to the side door and into the building. We entered the lobby, but there was a ninety-degree partition that hid us from prying eyes. Close at hand was a private elevator which had a sign beside the doors; For Official Use Only. I felt pretty official when Benson called the elevator to us and we stepped inside. This wasn't your normal, metal-walled elevator, either; it had soft padding and no annoying music. The doors closed behind us and Benson tapped the number for the top floor.

The elevator sped up, but I left my heart on the first floor; I admit I was nervous in this strange, foreign environment with this strange man as my sole guide. I jumped when Benson broke the silence by talking. "What?" I asked him.

"I asked if you were nervous, but that answered my question well enough," he replied. He wasn't teasing in his tone; it was more filled with pity and a need to give me comfort. "There's a reception room outside the boardroom. You can sit there if you'd like."

"Can I stay in your office?" I pleaded.

He shook his head. "I don't have time to show you the way."

I sighed. "Then I guess I'll stay in the reception room."

The elevator hit our floor and we stepped off into a long hall that stretched off to our right, but didn't go very far to our left because the elevator was so close to the outer wall of the building. On the opposite wall were a pair of inset doors flanked on either side by a pair of tall palms. There were other elevator doors to our right and along the same wall, and from these emerged about two dozen men and women in suits. At so many

intimidating faces and voices, I inched behind Benson. Three men broke off from the herd and came over to greet Benson. "Good morning, Benson," one of them jovially greeted. He was a man of about forty with thinning hair and a bright smile. Benson didn't outstretch his hand, but the man took his hand and shook it anyway.

"Good morning, Truman," Benson returned after he'd extracted his hand from the man's jovial greeting. Benson nodded at the other two, a swarthy man of fifty and tall, lanky man of thirty-five. "Schuster, Rowland." They smiled and nodded in return.

Truman slipped closer and lowered his voice. "Quite a mess we've got here, isn't it?" Being so close to Benson, he caught sight of me. His eyes widened and his face lit up with joy. "My, my, who have we here? Benson, introduce we old fogies to your lovely companion."

I dug my heels into the carpeted floor when Benson reluctantly dragged me out into the open. "Gentlemen, this is Miss Calhoun." His gloved hand swept over the men. "Misters Truman, Schuster, and Rowland." They smiled and shook hands with me, and I nodded and shook back with as much energy as I could muster considering how badly I was shaking. "She is my new secretary for the present, as my other left me rather suddenly."

Truman chuckled. "You mean to say you fired her," he corrected Benson.

"The parting was mutual," Benson countered. At that moment the double doors opened, and the crowd of suits flowed into the inner room which I saw to be the promised waiting room. Benson gestured to the other men. "It seems the meeting will begin soon. After you, gentlemen," he invited.

They joined the herd and hurried inside, but Benson kept at the rear and let everyone go ahead of us. We stepped into the inner sanctum and found ourselves facing another open pair of doors. Through those was a large meeting table with many high-backed, cushioned chairs. Everyone filed into

that room, but some paused to speak with a few secretaries on the left who sat at large, wooden desks. I noticed a long, padded bench on the right side with a few palms on either end. “You can sit there while we talk, but this may take a while.”

“It’d definitely be more comfortable than the car,” I countered.

“You could go for a walk,” he suggested.

I plopped myself down and managed a smile. “I probably shouldn’t. I’d be tempted to spend my food money on more shoes I don’t need.”

“That can be taken care of.” He dug out his wallet, but I waved him off.

“I’ll be fine, just go in there and try not to let them eat you alive,” I joked.

He didn’t smile, but he did put his wallet back. “I send you out as sheep among the wolves...” he murmured.

I blinked. “Beg your pardon?”

Benson shook his head. “Nothing, just quoting from an old book. Hopefully I’ll see you soon.”

He stepped into the large meeting room beyond the double doors, and they were shut behind him. The clang of the latch was ominous to my ears, and I turned away to find the secretaries staring at me. They quickly looked away when I caught them, but that didn’t make me feel any easier. I slid close to a large palm plant to hide myself from their prying eyes, and was doubly grateful for the protection when the doors to the hall opened and a couple hurriedly stepped inside. I was also surprised to see one of them, the woman of the two, was Constance Sievers; she sure got around in this company. The pair stopped a few feet from my hiding position, and Sievers handed the man his briefcase. “Good luck, sir,” she spoke up with a smile. I’d never seen her smile before; it was like looking at a grinning crocodile.

The man smiled back. “All I need is you, Miss Sievers,” he soppily replied. I resisted my gagging reflex. The two parted, with the man stepping into the boardroom and Miss Sievers leaving the way they’d come.

Then came the long wait. The boredom was punctuated by loud voices from the boardroom, most notably from Truman. I strained to hear Benson, just to give me a sign he was still alive in there and not eaten alive, but there was nothing until the doors opened after two hours. The men and women filed out like robots, reminding me why I chose not to get an office job. I noticed the strange man from before, the one with Sievers, and his grin was even wider than when he'd entered. He was flanked on all sides by admirers, both men and women, and all their tones were jolly.

Behind them came Benson, sans hat, Truman, and the other two. Their faces were somber and Truman spoke to Benson in a hushed voice. "I'm sure we can figure something out, or perhaps this arrangement won't be as inconvenient-"

Benson whirled around to face the man. "This will be very inconvenient to me. You know I prize my privacy above all else," Benson snapped back.

Truman sighed. "And that may be how this came to pass. You weren't at the helm as you used to be."

Benson narrowed his eyes. "What are you implying?"

I felt sorry for Truman; he looked like a man trying to tap dance on the edge of a pool of piranhas. "I'm trying to suggest you spend more time attending to your work here, rather than at your home."

"You know that's not possible for me," Benson countered.

Truman gestured to his person. "But you are here, and very well-looking, might I add. Maybe we have that young lady to thank for this small improvement." Truman's friendly eyes settled on me in my hiding spot.

Benson sighed, ran his hand through his hair, and put on his hat. "Whether I am here or there, we are stuck with that man as a new partner. Our only hope is his ambition is quenched."

Truman mournfully shook his head. "I very much doubt such a man's ambitions can ever be quenched."

"Call me if you hear any news about him," Benson requested.

Truman nodded. "Certainly. It was a pleasure seeing you again, rather than speaking over the phone." They cordially shook hands, and Benson repeated the formality with the other two. The three passed by, each with a kind nod toward me, and I was left alone with my boss. He looked exhausted; his gaunt face had traces of sweat and his hands shook.

I jumped up and smiled at him. "Ready to go home?"

He shakily smiled. "You read my thoughts, Angel."

I helped him back to the car and it was another quiet drive back to the house. When Benson got out he didn't look any more relieved, or rested, than when he got in. Inside the safety of the house he shed his dark clothing, and I saw how warm he'd been. His shirt and pants were soaked with sweat, and I swear I heard him squeak every time he took a step in his sweat-filled shoes. He removed the rest of his clothes down to his pants; even the socks flew off. I tried not to look, but it was hard when he tossed the wet clothing at me. "Put those in the laundry room," he gently ordered me.

I went to the rear of the house and deposited the laundry in a basket as though it were radioactive dirty laundry. Apparently his secretary needed to be tasked with doing his laundry, too, or it would never get done. I shoved a load into the washer and set it going, then went in search of Benson. I expected to find him in the study, but that room was empty. I heard a deep sigh from the living room and found him leaning back on the couch with one hand holding a damp cloth over his eyes.

"Things went that bad?" I asked him. He nodded. "You want to get it off your chest-" that damn nice chest, "-or will I not understand all the business lingo?"

He sighed, pulled the cloth off his face, and patted the cushion beside him. I sat down, careful to keep my distance from his sexy, half-naked body. Benson stared straight ahead and ran his hand through his short hair; the effect was untamed, wild. It suited him. "I don't know how much you know about my business--"

"Not a thing," I replied.

He smirked. "Then I suppose I should start at the beginning."

"Always a good place."

"My family has a very long tradition of being stockbrokers, investors, accountants, bankers, and other sorts of money managers."

"So your family tree looks more like a bean-counter pole?" I teased him.

He chuckled. "I suppose that's one way to look at it. That's the kind of family I was born into. I think I told you my mother died giving birth to me." I nodded. "My father and Cecil ran the family company until my father died twenty years ago." He raised his eyes to glance around the room. "Cecil raised me in this house, away from prying eyes--"

"-but not away from the family business," I guessed.

Benson gave a nod. "Cecil worked with me to use technology to keep track of my holdings, but even with Cecil's help control of the company slipped out of our hands. When I reached twenty-one I was given a partnership in the company, and a place on the board. I tried to manage everything on my own, but it was too much."

"And in comes the secretaries," I finished for him.

He glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. "Are you sure you're not reading my mind?"

"I could say maybe you don't have a mind to read, but I think you're a little smarter than the average person," I replied.

"I'll take that as a compliment, but would you like me to finish my story?" he returned.

“By all means.”

“I haven’t had much luck with secretaries. Perhaps because I brood too much,” he admitted.

“Definitely.”

He glared at me, and I imitated zipping my mouth shut. “As I was saying, I couldn’t find reliable help and recently things at the company have been growing more, well, intense. There’s been a lot of ambitious people climbing the ladder, and some of them made it onto the board without Cecil or me noticing. One of those men is Greg Monroe. He was the man surrounded by the others when we left the boardroom.”

That set off all kinds of alarms in my mind. “The young one? I saw him with Miss Sievers right before he went into the room,” I told him.

Benson straightened and snapped his face toward me. “What about Sievers?”

“She came in with that Greg guy and handed him his briefcase. They looked like they were old friends,” I explained to him.

I jumped when Benson slammed his hand down on the table. “That bitch!” he yelled. “She played me to get at information for Monroe!”

I blinked; this sounded outrageous, like something out of a romance serial. “Seriously?” I asked him.

“Seriously,” he growled through clenched teeth.

“So Sievers came here posing as a secretary to get info for Monroe? What kind of info?” I wondered.

“My personal contacts, messages, files, she had access to everything that dealt with the company,” he bitterly told me. “She passed on what she found out to Monroe and he maneuvered himself into a greater position of power on the board.”

This wasn’t just awful, it sounded downright illegal; like insider trading without the trading part. “Isn’t there anything you can do about it? Anything illegal about what they did?”

He grasped his head in both his hands and sighed; it was a deep, tired groan. “None that I can think of, but I’m so tired I can’t think straight.”

“The sun?” I guessed.

“Among the other stresses in my life,” he answered.

I cringed. “I hope I’m not one of them,” I whispered.

He glanced up at me with a wry smile. “Only if you’re a spy trying to steal my secrets, too,” he teased.

I grinned back. “Do you really think somebody as cute as me could be a spy?”

“Yes.”

I flinched, and clutched dramatically at my chest. “That really hurts.” He smirked, but in the creases of his face I could see the fatigue. “You do really look tired. Maybe you should take a nap and sleep on everything. You’ll feel better when you wake up.”

A mischievous grin slid onto his face. “That sounds like a wonderful idea,” he agreed. I saw his plan in those bright eyes, but couldn’t get up before he wrapped his arms around my waist and laid his head in my lap. He swung his legs up onto the couch and curled up around my side.

“I don’t think I had this in mind!” I scolded him. His eyes were already closed, and his breathing had evened out. I opened my mouth to yell his name, and realized I had never called him before; I had no idea what title I should have addressed him. “Mr. Benson?” I tried. He didn’t stir, but surely a man couldn’t fall asleep that fast. I shook his shoulders. “Benson?” Still nothing; I lost my patience for decorum and rolled my eyes. “John!” I hissed.

Not a sign of life other than his even breathing. I sighed and leaned back against the couch; it had been a long day for me, too. Driving Miss Daisy here to his meeting, being introduced to suits, and then playing the part of spy watching Sievers talk with that Monroe guy. It was enough to make a

girl exhausted, and yet excited; I'd been useful to him, and felt I'd definitely earned my pay for today.

I glanced down at his relaxed face, and gently ran a hand through his hair. He stirred, and I stiffened when his hands slid down behind me to grab my butt. I scowled at the sleeping pervert, my suspicions aroused by his trying to arouse us both. The breaking point came when one of his hands slid up and wrapped around my breast. My face turned red and I knocked him on the head. "Now I know you're not asleep!" I yelled at him.

He grinned and cracked one eye. "Too obvious?"

"Just a little, now get off," I growled back. I tried to pry him off my lap, but his arms wrapped around my waist and stuck him fast to me. I was trapped, and yet I wasn't alarmed; he could never scare me because he would never hurt me. "Haven't you ever heard of taking too many liberties with the hired help?" I scolded him.

"Yes, but when you love someone taking too many liberties isn't possible," he teased.

"You're proving yourself wrong right now," I snapped back.

Benson lifted his head and our noses brushed together. His voice was soft, low, and sweet, and sent shivers down my back. "I'm going to prove how much I love you." He took me in a kiss so intense my mind short-circuited and I pushed back against his lips. We battled for supremacy, and his demanding mouth won the war. My stiff body relaxed in his arms and I groaned into the kiss. He pulled away and showed off a smug smirk. "Proof enough?"

My cheeks were warm and my eyes half-lidded. I slowly shook my head. "No, I want more."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really?" I nodded, and his eyes wandered down to my blouse. My heaving chest strained my breasts against the front, and he raised his hand to pop off the top button. "That better?" he teased me.

I parted the shirt to show off the tantalizing tops of my breasts. “Is it?” I tortured him in return.

His eyes were glued to my pale breasts. “No,” he hoarsely whispered. He popped off two more, and my bra pushed out of my blouse to show off the full curves of my breasts. His breaths came out in strained gasps, and his bright blue eyes had a darker tinge to their color. They were the blue of a stormy sea; he was holding back that storm inside himself; I wanted to sail those waters and let the wind take us where it would.

I undid the rest of my buttons and completely opened my blouse. He caught my hand and raised those sultry eyes to mine. “Are you sure?” he softly asked me.

I wasn’t, but not enough that I wanted to stop. My hand slid up and seductively massaged the tops of my swollen, tingling breasts. They ached for his gentle caresses, as did the rest of me. Heat pooled between my legs and soaked my underwear, and I rubbed my thighs together to satisfy the craving. Rubbing my thighs only increased my need, and I leaned my head back and groaned; that broke his control.

John pulled me down so my back was against the cushions of the couch, and went after my breasts like he was a man starved of milk. He nipped and licked at my sensitive flesh while his hands pawed at the bra clasp. The bra was freed, and his hot lips grasped my buds in a wild abandonment to lust. I moaned and arched my back into his sweet mouth. My legs opened and he settled between them, but not comfortably. He rubbed his hard manhood against my inner thigh like a dog in heat, and I was his bitch; I whimpered and pushed back.

His hands worked feverishly to remove my pants, and with my help they found themselves on the floor along with my shirt and bra. I had only my underwear to protect me from his feral needs, but he paused atop me and glimpsed my nakedness. His hungry eyes swooped over every curve and bit of flesh. I blushed against such an inspection and tried to cover

myself with my arms. He pulled my arms apart and leaned atop me to catch me in one of his commanding kisses.

I felt him pull away his pants and underwear, and he lay atop me completely naked. His pale skin blended with mine as our hips rocked against one another. I looped a finger beneath the band of my underwear and slowly, teasingly pulled that down. He grabbed the band and tore it down my legs. His thick manhood twitched and pulsed with heat, and he eagerly set it at my hot, wet entrance.

He paused too long; I needed him as badly as he needed me. "Please," I groaned. "Please take me."

John grunted and thrust himself into me. What he didn't count on was that he was my first, and he roughly broke through my maidenhood. I flinched and grasped his shoulders with my quivering hands. His eyes glanced down at me in surprise and fear. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't know-" I shook my head.

"It's fine, just don't you dare stop," I breathed out.

John nodded and pulled out just a little. My tight, wet walls clung to him, and he shuddered at the feel of them massaging his stiff erection. I let out a shaky breath, both from the dissipating pain and the increasing pleasure. His entire length brushed against my sensitive nub, and started a flow of sensual titillation. He grunted and lay down on top of me, covering me in his sweat-soaked, tense body. I wrapped my legs around him, and when he pushed back in he penetrated deeper than before. We both groaned and gasped, and he planted soft, nipping kisses along my neck.

His pace was tortuously slow, but oh so gratifying. I matched his hips and pushed against him, and my nerves hummed with the pleasure of him brushing against me. My hands slid along his tense, sweat-soaked back, and reached as far as his delicious butt. He penetrated me again and again, and I reveled in the faster speed as his lust overtook his desire to keep us in this self-made paradise. I squirmed and gasped, and he wrapped his arms around

me and pinned me to the couch to hold me still while he thrust into my quivering folds. I couldn't keep up with his fast penetrations, and my body twitched and pulsed with the reverberations of the coming orgasm.

My muscles deliciously tightened and my juices flowed over him as he pounded harder into me. The world around me disappeared; there was only the feel of him inside of me, pushing me to a greater place of sensual satisfaction. The waves of pleasure flowed over me with all the power of an ocean, leading me higher and higher. I gasped for breath and thrashed in his hold. He tightened around me, in me. All my senses but one disappeared; there was only touch, and he touched me in my deepest, most sensual spot to the point of bursting with desire.

My orgasm swept over me in crashing waves. He sent me to a place I could never have dreamed of in all my fantasies. It was so filled with blinding lights and a touching, lustful wave of bliss that I never wanted to leave, but all good things come to an end. He finished inside of me and collapsed atop my smaller frame, pulling me out of paradise and the air out of my lungs.

I wheezed and glared at his face in the crook of my neck. His eyes were shut tight, and his breathing was shallow and hoarse. He was soaked in sweat, but I'd never seen so great an angel as I saw in him. I smiled and brushed aside one of his golden locks. His eyes fluttered open, and those sky-blue eyes were returned. The stormy seas were passed; we'd made love. Now all I wanted to do was sleep, but I was afraid he'd strangle me with his weight. "Mind switching places?" I squeaked out.

His eyes widened when he realized my dilemma. "Oh right." He deftly flipped us both over so I was on top and he beneath me. It was a comfortable arrangement for both of us, and completed when he grabbed a blanket from over the back of the couch and lay it over us for some propriety. "Better?" he asked me.

I yawned and nodded before I set my head down in the crook of his neck. He wrapped his strong arms around me, and we both fell asleep.

I woke up an hour before sunset with sore muscles and a crick in my neck from lying on something hard. I lifted my head and found the hard thing was John's chest. The man himself was still asleep and, most importantly, naked. We both were, and the only thing that saved anyone from coming into the room and having an image engraved on their memory was the blanket from over the couch.

That scenario rattled me; what if someone *had* come in and found us in this, well, compromising position? I blushed to think of the shock, horror, and mental scarring. Hell, what we did struck *me* with horror; I'd finally done, well, my *boss*. How could I have let the relationship slip into this? What would he do now that his craving for my flesh was satisfied? Did he think I was a slut? Worse, did he think he could take me anytime now that he had me under his power?

I shuddered; that's what happened. I had been under his power. His delicious, masculine power. It had felt so good to have his strong arms around me, protecting me from the world by becoming my world. The way he held me close and touched me where I'd never allowed anyone to touch me. He was my first, nobody could take his place, and that scared me. He had a place in my life, a permanent place, and I didn't know if he was the one I wanted in there.

I slipped off the couch, taking the blanket with me, and wrapped myself in it as I stood over his still, pale form. His hair was ruffled, and I almost regretted that his shining blue eyes were closed. However, closed meant I could make a clean getaway, and he wouldn't be able to stop me. I had to leave here and think about what had happened. Staying in that house meant biased memories, and *he* was there. This was all just so confusing that only escape could clear my thoughts.

I grabbed all my clothes and crept out into the hall. Each squeak of the old boards made me wince and wish for DW40 for wood. I changed in the study and snuck back down the hall to the front door with my purse and coat in hand. As a precaution I slipped my head into the living room to check on Sleeping Beauty. Somebody must have kissed him because he was gone.

A noise at my back startled me, and I instinctively swung my arm around to knock their head off. John grabbed my arm and raised a mischievous eyebrow. "Do you hit all your employers, or just the sneaky ones?"

I wrenched my arm from his grasp and scowled at him. "I don't do anything to my employers except what they deserve." At my words his grin grew wider, and that made me angry. I didn't want him to see me as an easy sex partner. "But I make a mistake every now and then, and I'm going to remedy this one by leaving." I stomped toward the door, but he grasped my arm again. "Let me go! You can't keep me here!"

He let me go and I stumbled back into the wall beside the living room entrance. His expression held confusion and pain. "What's wrong? Why are you acting like this?"

"What's wrong? You're asking me what's *wrong*?" I gestured to the couch. "We just had *sex* on the couch, that's what's wrong!"

"We could have had it in the bed, but the couch was right there," he pointed out.

I threw up my arms. “You’re impossible! All you’re thinking about is getting back into my pants!”

John’s good humor slipped from his face. “That’s not what I’m thinking, and you should know that.”

I furiously shook my head. “But I *don’t* know that, and I can’t think straight here. I need to leave.”

I rushed to the door and made it out onto the porch with John close behind. “Wait! Please don’t go!” he begged me.

I didn’t pay any attention to him until I was out on the gravel driveway, and that’s when I heard his bare footsteps behind me. I swung around to find him blinking in the sun in only his pants. The sun shone off his pale skin, and his blue eyes sparkled in the full light of the evening day star. My eyes widened and I rushed over to place my hands on his bare chest. “What in the world are you doing?” I shrieked at him. I tried to push him toward the house, but he stood firmer than a boulder in a field needing to be plowed.

“I won’t go back inside without you,” he insisted.

“And I won’t go back, so you go on in right now!” I ordered him.

“Then come back in with me or I won’t go,” John repeated.

I glanced between him and my car; freedom from this insanity was so close, but I expected him to turn the shade of a tomato at any moment. I growled, turned him around and shoved him back into the house. He toddled along with a stupid grin on his face, but when we got inside the dark hall I noticed his body had a distinct touch of heat on the skin. “Aren’t you supposed to combust or something?” I quipped as I shut the door behind me.

John turned around and shook his head. “No, but the symptoms will come along in an hour or two.”

“And what are the symptoms?” I asked him.

“You’ll see the welts and blisters, but I’ll feel the heat,” he replied.

“Any way we can avoid this? Any medication or anything?”

He sadly shook his head. “The only relief is a cold bath, and even that-hey!”

I had shoved him toward the stairs. “Then let’s get one for you right now so you’ll be ready for when the heat comes,” I told him. I shoved and pulled him upstairs and into the bathroom, where I readied his bath and sat him down on the toilet. “Now watch the water and don’t move!”

John noticed me creeping backwards to the door and shot up from his royal seat. “Where are you going?” he questioned me.

“Only downstairs, now watch that water and I’ll be right back!” I closed the door behind me and clattered downstairs. In the study I found what I was looking for; a phone number for Cecil. Since he’d raised the boy from the age of ten he would know best what to do in this situation. I called the number and was relieved when Cecil answered. “Cecil, this is Miss Calhoun, the girl-”

“I remember you,” he chuckled. “What seems to be the problem that you’d search out my number?”

“John went out into the sun without a shirt on and-”

“What!” he exclaimed, and I flinched. “Why in heaven’s name would he do that?”

“Because he was being stupid-”

“Obviously,” Cecil quipped. “Have you made him comfortable? Within reason, that is.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, and he’s filling the tub with cold water, but isn’t there anything else we can do?”

“I’m afraid not, but I’ll be right over.” Cecil canceled the call and I felt a wave of relief wash over me and sweep me onto land; he would take charge and handle John while I slunk off.

Cecil was quick in coming, and even quicker to take charge. He stalked up the stairs and surprised John in the bathroom on the, well, John. John

shot up and glared at his uncle with me behind Cecil. “What are you doing here?”

Cecil looked him up and down, and frowned. “I heard you’d done something stupid. Now I can see for myself that it’s true.” I, too, could now see the effects. His skin had a reddish hue and he moved with a stiffness showing the increasing pain he felt.

John scowled at Cecil. “I’ll be fine. It’s not like this hasn’t happened before,” he countered.

“But not for a long while, and I can’t think why you would-” Cecil paused and glanced between John and me. I blushed, and he smiled at me. “Could you leave us for a moment, Miss Calhoun? I want to, um, help John into his bath.”

I eagerly nodded and would have shot off but for John’s pleading look; he still didn’t want me to run off. I sighed. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me,” I told them.

I tromped downstairs and went into the living room to relax. With the couch sitting there laying testament to our sexual romp, the living room was now the worst room in the house to clear my worried, befuddled thoughts. I distracted myself by listening to the murmuring voices upstairs. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but John didn’t sound happy and Cecil was amused by something. The exchange was tedious until John’s voice rose up and there was a splash as a great amount of water spilled over the walls and floor. I shot up and stared with wide eyes at the ceiling. The splashing noise was followed by a great deal of laughter, but only from Cecil.

A few minutes later I heard squeaking shoes down the stairs and stuck my head out into the hall to see Cecil step down soaking wet and with a big grin on his face. He noticed me and aimed his wet feet toward me, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind him. “There’s something I wish to speak with

you about, Miss Calhoun. Would you do me the honor of stepping outside so I may dry off a little?" he politely requested.

"Um, sure."

He guided me out to the gravel driveway and soaked in some of the lingering sun before he turned to me with an attentive glance. "You must be very fond of John to have stayed this long with him."

I blinked in bewilderment. "I'm supposed to work for him, remember?" I countered.

He waved aside my explanation with his hand and a frown. "Yes, yes, John told me the arrangement, but nobody could be this in need of money to put up with the strangeness around John's life. There must be something else you're looking for."

I shrugged. "I just wanted to help him get outside. He just seemed so afraid of his shadow, literally, that I thought maybe he just needed somebody by him to encourage him out."

"So you stayed out of pity for him?" Cecil guessed.

"I guess."

"I don't buy into that," he snappily replied.

I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him. "And why not?"

"Because I believe there's another reason you stayed with him."

"And that would be?"

Cecil leaned in and winked at me. "That age-old troublemaker, love," he answered.

My face warmed with my blush, but I held my tone firm. "How can I love somebody? I just met him a few days ago."

He chuckled. "Does love have a point at which it comes into existence?"

"I don't know, but I don't love him!" I insisted.

Cecil still grinned from ear to ear. "Then perhaps you might tell me why your hair is such a mess, and your clothes in such a disarray on your

person?”

I self-consciously tried to de-muss my clothes and control my hair. “It’s been a hectic day for us.”

His face lost some of its humor. “So I heard, but you haven’t directly contradicted my statement.”

I stopped my fussing and blinked at him. “What was the question again?”

“Do you love him, or not?” he rephrased.

“I-I don’t know,” I stammered out. “I mean, he’s nice and cute and a lot of other adjectives, but I don’t know how I feel about him. I mean, how am I supposed to feel about my boss?”

“Is that all he is to you?” Cecil persisted.

I threw up my hands. “I don’t know, okay? I can’t think straight, not after-” I froze, and Cecil raised an eyebrow. “Not after today,” I finished.

Cecil sighed and rung water out of his coat. “Well, I’ll leave him in your uncertain hands and check up on him tomorrow. Make sure he stays in that tub for at least an hour, and if you need to feel free to add some ice cubes.”

Rather than me escaping with Cecil watching over John, Cecil escaped in his car and left me with the patient. I groaned and glanced up at the old house. The selfish part of my mind told me to run away, but that would make me both a coward and break my promise to John to not leave. He’d probably get in his car and drive after me, especially since he didn’t know where I lived.

I trudged back into the house and upstairs to the bathroom door. I didn’t hear anything on the other side, and knocked. “Yes?” John called to me.

I almost heeded his pain-filled voice and rushed inside the bathroom to nurse him, but I held steady to the other side of the door. “It’s me, Trixie. How are you doing?” I asked him.

“I’ve been better,” he groaned. “Is Cecil still here?”

“No, he left, but he said you had to stay in the bathtub for an hour or more,” I replied.

“I don’t care about that. I wanted to talk to you about what happened between us earlier today,” John spoke up.

I blushed at the mere mention of our tryst; traitorous female cheeks. I meant for my voice to be firm and indifferent, but it came out shaky and fearful; I was afraid he’d send me away. “What’s there to talk about?” I countered.

“About us. What we did changes everything,” he insisted.

“Including my salary?” I tried to joke, but that sounded dirty even in my mind. There was silence on the other end of the door, and I hung my head. “I’m sorry. That came out pretty bad, didn’t it?”

John sighed. “This is foolish talking through the door like we’re miles apart. Get in here,” he ordered.

“I’m just fine outside,” I replied. I didn’t want him to see the tears pooling in my eyes.

“Then I’m coming out to you,” he countered. I heard the splash of water and dove inside the bathroom to stop him.

“Don’t you dare get out of there!” I scolded him. I pushed his nakedness back under the water and tried to slip away to sit against the door, but John gently grabbed my hand and held me beside the tub. I turned my face away, but his gentle fingers clasped my chin and raised my eyes to look into his. They looked as scared and uncertain as I felt, and it was then I realized we were thinking the same thing; we were both terrified the other was going to push us away. “I don’t care about the money, or about any of this experiment. I just want to know if you’re going to leave me and never come back,” he softly told me. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. He smiled sadly at me. “If you do stay I have to warn you that I can’t change how I feel about you.”

I shook my head. “And I’m not ready to take that leap yet, but I’ll stay and be your secretary,” I promised him.

That didn’t sit well with him as clouds of worry flew across those sky-blue eyes. “Then you don’t feel the same way?”

I sighed and pulled my chin out of his fingers. “I don’t know what I feel, and that’s why I don’t want anything to change-yet. Until I figure out what I want to do I’ll stay here and keep care of you.” I glanced at his red skin and smirked. “It looks like you need somebody to keep you from doing stupid things for stupid people.”

John raised an eyebrow. “I did this because of you,” he countered.

“Like I said, stupid things for stupid people.”

He smiled; I was glad to see he could still do it through the burnt muscles on his face. “I guess I’m stupid that way.”

“Yep, so I’ll stay on until I figure us out while keeping you out of doing stupid things,” I promised.

“So longer than the week?” he eagerly asked me.

I shrugged, and a teasing smile slipped onto my lips. “If that’s what it takes, but don’t go trying to convince me to stay with any of that sexy stuff.”

John leaned over the tub and caught me in his dazzling kiss. I pulled us apart and gasped while the imp had that evil grin on his face. “Like that?” he asked me. I dumbly nodded my head. He leaned back against the walls of the tub, looking as satisfied as a cat with a mouse; I suddenly had a craving for cheese. “I guess we’ll have to see if I can break down that boss-employee barrier in your mind before you leave.”

I smirked. “Challenge accepted.”

A NOTE FROM MAC

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PALE COMPANION:

“Where in the world have you been?” Sheila shrieked at me.

That was the greeting I got on entering the diner, my old stomping grounds of employment only a week before. I'd come in to see how everything was going, but not to tender my resignation. My place with my current boss, John Benson, was still too fragile for me to want to quit my reliable, if poor, diner position. Just a few days before was the day he'd admitted his affection for me in the bathtub, and where I'd decided to sift through my emotions of the coming days and weeks, maybe months, to see how I felt. I found a lot of cobwebs brushing through those emotions.

I sheepishly smiled at my overactive friend, and was grateful there weren't many customers this late at night. “In another part of it, but sorry for going missing for a few days. Things got, well, hard

for me-” and my employer, “-and I guess I just lost track of the calendar. It wandered off and I still haven’t hunted it down.”

Sheila put her hands on her hips and scowled at me. “Trixie Calhoun, I think you forgot about me. After all these years of working together you forget me in a week.”

I slid onto one of the diner stools and cupped my chin in my hand with a smile on my face. “It’s only been a few days,” I countered.

“It’s felt like forever!” Sheila whined. “The boss has me working even more shifts and all the regulars keep asking where you are and when you’re coming back.” She leaned over the counter and gave me a stern look. “You are coming back, aren’t you?”

I sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know, but you’ll be one of the first people to find out.”

Sheila was puzzled over my uncertainty. “Don’t know? I thought you were just going to be gone a week.”

“My plans kind of hit a few speed bumps-” in the form of his nice abs, “-and it turns out he’s going to be needing me for a bit longer.” Forever, if he had any say in the matter.

“What kind of speed bumps?” she asked me.

“The kind that keep me from coming back here soon,” I replied.

“That’s not an answer,” she complained. She searched my eyes, and I looked into hers; it was like looking into a house where all the lights were switched off because somebody forgot to pay the bill. “You’re not telling me something. What is it?”

“I lost a pound?” I suggested, which was true. Sex really does help a person lose weight.

“I’m being serious,” Sheila sullenly argued.

“So am I.”

“If you’re staying with this guy it must be because you want to. You never do anything you don’t want to,” she mused. Her eyes widened and a squeal escaped her lips. “Is he giving you a fortune to care for him?”

I scoffed. “I wish, but the money’s not bad.” At least that’s what was promised; I hadn’t actually seen a dime of it yet.

Sheila threw up her arms. “I give up. Why are you staying with him?”

“Maybe I like his company,” I let out. My face instantly blushed when a sly smile slid onto Sheila’s face.

“Like his company, huh?” she repeated in a mischievous voice. She inched close to me so our faces were only a few, well, inches away. At least she had the decency to lower her volume to normal-human rather than ear-splitting. “Have you had sex with him?”

I choked on my spittle at the forward question, and Sheila slammed a hand on the table in glee. “You have! You sneaky, dirty little girl you!”

I jumped over the counter and slapped my hand over her mouth. The other patrons looked at us like we were insane, which was never far from the truth. “Are you trying to tell the whole city about it?” I hissed at her.

“Hn nre, nh,” she mumbled out through my hand.

I rolled my eyes and removed my hand. “What?”

Sheila’s voice was a soft whisper. “I said I’m sorry, Trix. I didn’t mean to be so loud.” Then that evil smile crept back on her face. “So is he terrible? Has he showered you with diamonds yet?”

“No, no and, before you ask any other stupid questions, no,” I replied. “I’d also rather not talk about it-”

“He’s not using you, is he?” she softly gasped.

“-here,” I finished. I tilted my head and glared at her sheepish expression. “Do you think I’d be a person somebody could use?” She shrugged, and I rolled my eyes. “The answer to that question is no.”

“Then what’s going on between you?” she wondered.

“What time do you get off?”

“About midnight.”

“Then I’ll pick you up and we can hit up one of the food places around campus. They’re always open that late,” I suggested.

“Your treat?” she pleaded.

I sighed and nodded. “My treat.” Sheila squealed and clapped her hands. I wondered at her child-like-well, everything. It almost made me jealous; almost.

I picked her up at midnight and we drove to one of the popular burger joints just off campus. Cars were piled as deep as the triple stack burger specialty and we squeezed our way inside to find all the tables were full. I was about to suggest we go somewhere where there was enough room to inhale *and* exhale when somebody waved to us from a corner booth; prime real estate for comfort and privacy.

Sheila tugged on my sleeve and nodded at the waver; it was the guy I’d met at the library the other day, Will Tanner. “You know him?” she asked me.

I nodded and dragged her over to the booth. We slid into the curved, cushioned seat with me sandwiched between the two and I could finally breathe out. “Thanks for throwing a lifesaver to us. I thought we were going to drown in that crowd.”

He smiled and looked us over. “I’m sure someone would’ve saved such pretty girls from that fate.” He nodded at Sheila. “Who’s your friend?”

“Oh, Sheila, this is Will Tanner. Will, Sheila,” I introduced them. I was surprised when Sheila curtly nodded her head at the guy; she was usually so bubbly I expected to see her float up and pop.

Will didn’t seem to notice her stiff manner, and instead turned to me. “When I saw you get out of your car I remembered that you didn’t come visit me after our meeting,” he scolded me.

I shrugged. “I got caught up in some stuff and didn’t have time. So what have you been up to? Saving more damsels in the library?”

“And fending off dragons,” he laughed. “But to be honest I don’t get out much. Sometimes I just sit here and watch people just to feel like I’m a part of their lives.”

That didn’t quite square with my recollections of our last conversation. “Didn’t you say you were on the football team?”

He smiled. “You have a good memory. Yeah, I’m on the team but I don’t feel like I belong, you know? I was thinking about quitting and focusing more on my studies. Speaking of which, I should probably be going. You still have my number and address?” he asked me.

I patted my purse. “Entombed somewhere in here for all eternity,” I assured him.

Will laughed. “Then you have the upper hand on me. Any chance I can get a phone number or address?”

I shrugged. “Sure, why not?” He pulled out a pen and paper, and I reached for them but Sheila tugged on my arm. I turned to her and she feverishly shook her head. “What? What’s wrong?” She didn’t reply in words, but instead turned to Will with a dark glare on her face.

Will smiled back at her. “I get the feeling you don’t like me,” he guessed.

“You’d be right,” she shot back.

I jotted down my number and quickly passed it back to Will. "Sorry about my friend here, she's a little strange."

"No problem. Your phone number would be worth risking my life for," he replied. He patted me on the back and slid out of the booth. He waved to us and disappeared into the crowd.

I turned to Sheila with some confused thoughts. "What the hell is wrong with you? You look like you actually wanted to get physical with him, and not in the baby-making way," I asked her. If she had been any more hostile there would have been declarations of war.

She turned away with a sullen face. "I met that guy before. I guess he didn't remember me," she mumbled.

This was a news flash. "Met him where?"

"He used to be my boyfriend."

"I'm guessing that didn't break up so well," I replied.

Sheila stiffly shook her head. "I broke up with him because I found out he was going out with two other girls at the same time."

I cringed. "That's the kind of guy I just gave my phone number to?" She nodded, and I playfully glared at her. "Why didn't you try to stop me?" I hissed at her.

"I did," she hissed back. We sounded like arguing snakes.

"Why didn't you try to stop me *harder*," I emphasized.

"Because you're just too stubborn." It was hard to argue with that one.

I sighed and from my purse I removed the piece of paper with his information. I tore it into two and tossed the pieces onto the table. "That's one problem taken care of."

"I hope so..." Sheila muttered.

"Why are you hoping? Why not believing?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "Because that guy's a little weird-"

“That explains how he got on with both of us.”

“-and more stubborn than you.”

I let out a fake gasp of horror. “Say it ain’t so!” I softly exclaimed.

That cracked a smile on Sheila’s serious face. “It’s just that he tried to get me to come back to him, but I went to the other girls and asked them about it. I guess he’d been trying to get them back at the same time, too.”

“That guy’s got balls. Three of them to handle that many girls,” I mused.

“He only had two. One of the other girls made sure of that when she cornered him and tore into him.”

“Literally?” I guessed.

“Literally. I heard he had to have some of his-” she pointed down at her lap, “-pieced back together.

I cringed; hell hath nothing on a woman cheated on by her boyfriend. That guy was lucky to be alive, though it wasn’t lucky for me. “Anything else I should know about Mr. Perseverance?”

“He can be a little possessive, which is why he tried to get us all back.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad.”

“He walked us to our classes to keep other boys from talking to us.”

“A knight in green armor.”

“And he came to our apartments whenever he could, even when we weren’t there.”

“Now you’re starting to creep me out. How’d you know he’d been there?”

“Because I found him sitting on my couch a couple of times.”

“Nothing wrong with that-kind of. He just wanted to be there-”

“He didn’t have a key to my apartment.”

I cringed. “Um, let’s just forget about him and hope he does the same to me,” I suggested.

“Good because now that we’re alone I want you to spit it out,” Sheila commanded; I obeyed by spitting into my hand and holding it out to her. “Not that! We’re alone, so tell me about your new boss, the pale guy.”

I glanced around the crowded, noisy room. “I don’t think this was quite the alone place I was thinking about.”

“Do you know any of these people?” she asked me. I shook my head. “Then we’re alone in a crowd, so out with all the juicy details.”

Her request conjured up some very specific images. “I don’t think I’m going to go into that much detail,” I told her.

“You know what I mean!” She playfully grabbed me by the collar and shook me. “Now tell me everything!”

“Well, there’s not much to tell,” I teasingly replied. I dramatically crossed my arm over my forehead and tilted my head back. “I claimed his heart when first we met.”

“You shouldn’t have been an actress,” Sheila playfully replied.

I dropped my arm and the act. “You’re right, I would’ve been too good for the cameras, but to answer your question, again, there really isn’t that much to tell. I have a boss-with-benefits relationship with him until I decide how I feel about him.”

Sheila’s face drooped. “That’s it?” she asked me.

I snorted. “You act as if we should be playing hide-and-go-seek with each other’s clothes.”

Sheila slid her chin down onto the table. “I was at least hoping for something mysterious about him. Does he look even more like Dracula without his clothes?”

I rolled my eyes. “He looks like most everyone else without their clothes, naked.”

She scowled at me, but her eyes widened and she sprang up from the table. “If you’re not going to take advantage of this then maybe I can. Any way he can introduce me to his rich friends?”

I evilly grinned. “He doesn’t really get out all that much, that whole vampire-appearance thing, but he has an uncle that might be available. He’s just slightly used by life.”

“Slightly used by life?” Sheila repeated.

“Yes. He’s about fifty.”

“On second thought maybe I’ll just keep looking for my own rich man,” my friend remarked. And thus ended my short but memorable matchmaker career. “So how long are you going to take to figure out you want to go out with your boss?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve been dodging Cupid’s arrow for so long I bet his quiver is empty and he’s abandoned me to a life of being an old maid.”

“Just remember that even with his pasty skin he’s a rich guy and girls all over the city would kill to get even a date with him,” she reminded me.

“We’ll just have to hope they kill each other and leave us out of it,” I quipped.

“That’s easy for you to say. I bet you’re living in his house now, aren’t you?” Sheila teased.

I surprised her by shaking my head. “Nope, still in that dingy apartment.”

“What? Why?” she exclaimed.

I tilted my head in her direction and raised an eyebrow for added effect. “We’ve only known each other a week. In that short a time I

wouldn't move in with the Queen of England if she offered me the best room in Buckingham Palace."

Sheila threw up her arms. "I give up. You really don't know how to milk a good situation."

"I'm not majoring in agriculture," I countered.

"Right, rocks." She playfully knocked her fist against my head. "Just like your stubborn skull."

"Hey, careful with that. I'm still using it," I laughed. My stomach interrupted us with its mournful cries of sorrow. "But how about we get some grub before I decide to be a cannibal?"

"I thought you'd never get around to that," Sheila replied with a smile. "Oh, and don't forget about that creep, Tanner. He might come back to bite you in the ass," she warned me.

"I won't forget," I promised; I cared too much about my ability to sit.

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