

DENVER · MEN BOOK ONE

CEO'S

Pregnant Lover

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LESLIE NORTH

DENVER MEN

CEO's Pregnant Lover

The SEAL's Virgin Lover

FBI Agent's Reluctant Lover

Navy SEAL's Innocent Italian

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DENVER MEN BOOK ONE

CEO'S
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BLURB

Never mix business with pleasure...

Klutzy, adorable Brianna Daughtry is nothing like the women Trent Caldwell is usually attracted to. The handsome, cold-hearted billionaire goes for bimbos and eye-candy who look good on his arm, women who won't make a fuss when things end. But Brianna, his new temporary assistant, is nothing like that at all...

She's the sort of woman who can make a man's heart beat faster. And make him wish he were a different man...a better man. The type of woman Trent usually avoids at all costs. Except, he can't. And even if he could, his heart doesn't want to...

Brianna can't believe someone like Trent could be remotely attracted to her. But she can't deny that his smoldering looks, his lingering touches, and his intoxicating kisses tell her otherwise. Yes, he's maddeningly overbearing and arrogant. But somehow, the alpha businessman has a sweet side as well.

Even with Trent's old nemesis casting a shadow over their happiness, it seems her dreams of forever may come true. Until a devastating turn of events threatens to tear everything they've built apart...

This book was previously released in 2014.

MAILING LIST

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(Denver Men Book One)

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“H R, Janet speaking. How may I he-”

“Janet? Trent. I need you to send up a replacement for Pam. Her daughter was injured in an accident and she had to leave. I’ve got no idea how long she will be gone, so send me someone that you weren’t planning on firing at the end of the week,” her boss, Trent Caldwell, said. An alpha male to his core, Trent’s matter-of-fact tone confirmed he couldn’t care less if she fired twenty incompetent people that week. If they couldn’t do the job, they were out.

“Which daughter?” Janet asked, concern flooding her voice.

“Susan.”

“Oh, no.” Susan had just delivered twins two months ago, which meant grandmother Pam would be out of commission for quite some time. The timing couldn’t be worse. Trent was acquiring a large production company in Europe, and the contracts were in chaos. Contracts that Pam was in charge of fixing, and her deadline was *today*.

Janet mentally ran through her options and settled on the one person she suspected might be strong enough to counterbalance Trent’s dominance. Brianna Daughtry. Only twenty-four, but mature beyond her years, the retro-chic girl was the complete opposite of the women Trent usually dated, so she didn’t anticipate there being an issue there. Not that Trent would ever do something like that. Given his propensity to grow bored of the women he dated, Trent knew better than to date anyone from work. But then again, Brianna was

special. “Don’t worry about it; I have just the woman. She’s only been with the company for about six months, but her reviews are excellent.”

“Send her up after lunch. I’m right in the middle of negotiations for that buyout in Germany, and Pam didn’t have time to make the corrections on the contract yet. I need them by three o’clock at the latest.”

“I assume we are offering her the same benefits and salary Pam received?”

“Of course.” Trent started to hang up the phone.

“Shawn and I went to that symphony fundraiser last night.”

“What?” Trent said. Janet heard the sigh in his voice, the impatience. “And? I assume it was a smashing success.”

“It was, but that wasn’t my point.”

“Well, get to it,” he barked. “I have work to do and so do you.”

“I saw Marco Bresi.” She paused, letting Trent digest the information. Marco Bresi was a very wealthy, very influential businessman in Europe. He and Trent had a shared past marked with tragedy. It was the reason Marco had stayed in Europe for the last three years. Janet had been shocked to see him back in the States, especially in Denver. His appearance meant only one thing—he’d returned to follow through on his threats against Trent.

Silent, Trent let Janet's words sink in. Serena's father was back. He tamped down on the emotions that threatened to sideline his focus. He hadn't thought of her in more than a year, and with his current business predicaments, he needed to keep it that way.

Serena Bresi had taken the fashion world by storm at the age of sixteen. Three years later, she had met Trent at a fundraiser in New York City, and they had fallen madly in love. Everything had gone smoothly until Serena had signed a contract with a large fashion house in Milan and had temporarily moved to Italy.

Four months later, he had flown to Milan to surprise Serena for the weekend. He'd gone straight to her flat, flowers in hand, pleased to find her home in the middle of the afternoon. The surprise had been on him, however, as she had answered the door in the arms of her current lover.

Trent had been furious. He'd dropped the flowers on the floor and walked away even as she fell to her knees and begged him to stay.

Three weeks later, in the early morning hours, she'd finally called him. He'd reached for the phone without checking the caller ID, then listened to her tearful apology and pleas for help. She was pregnant with her new lover's child and expected Trent to come to her rescue.

Repulsed, he'd hung up without replying. Two days later, Serena had driven her car off a bridge. The lies in her suicide

note made it seem as though Trent had gotten her pregnant and refused to do the right thing, and that she couldn't bear to shame her family by having a child out of wedlock. While a part of him did grieve her death, he was still angry that she'd chosen to name him in her suicide note. It wasn't as if he was in a position to demand a post-mortem paternity test, leaving him with no way to dispute her lies.

Marco Bresi used his wealth and influence to keep the suicide note out of the media, then took his vengeance on Trent through the business world. Thus far, their feud had been strictly professional, but Trent knew that it was only a matter of time before the man attacked him in his personal life. With Marco showing his face in Denver, it seemed that time had arrived.

“Did you speak with him?” Trent asked.

“Yes. He made a point of cornering us during the intermission. There was such hatred in his eyes when he asked about you. I know you and Serena broke up before her death...”

“Janet, let it go. What happened between Serena and me was private. I will not discuss it. What Marco believes are lies. I've tried to tell him the truth, but he doesn't want to hear it.” Trent took a breath. “Now, we both have work to do. Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“He asked me to deliver a message to you.”

Trent clenched his jaw and then looked to the ceiling. Whatever the message was, he assumed it was more threat than anything. He felt bad that Janet and her husband had been put in the middle of their feud. “Tell me.”

“He said you were going to get what you deserve, and that you should watch your back. He also mentioned a company called Global Tech. Does that mean anything?”

Trent cursed and pulled up the information on the company they were currently buying. He scrolled through the list of shareholders and cursed again. How could he have missed that?

Marco Bresi's company owned thirty-two percent of the stock. No wonder he was in the States. He must have gotten wind Caldwell Enterprises was negotiating a hostile takeover and talking with bidders for when the company split. The current shareholders stood to lose major money when that happened.

Trent had dealt with Marco's manipulations during other business negotiations, and the man was ruthless. Depending on which way this deal went, either Trent or Marco could potentially lose millions. Despite everything, he had no wish to harm Marco or his family. And besides, he didn't have time for these complications. Not now.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he exhaled. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll handle the problem. Just get me that assistant." Trent hung up, then briefly considered calling Janet again to make sure she sent him someone who wouldn't burst into tears at the first sign of criticism. Agitated, he went back to reading the current contract with Global Tech, marking in red ink all the necessary changes. He would deal with Marco Bresi later. Right now, he had to finish this contract.

Brianna heard Pete Newman call her name above the whirr of the copy machine. He stood in the doorway, peering at her, and she returned his easy smile. Two years her senior, Pete was one of the financial analysts for Caldwell Enterprises. Their company purchased failing businesses and either sold them off in pieces or turned them around and made them market leaders again. Pete was on the team to determine which fate befell each new acquisition.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey, HR called. Mrs. Marshall wants to see you up in her office.”

“Oh.”

Pete frowned. “What’s wrong? You look concerned.”

“Did she say what she needed to see me about?” Usually when people around here were called up to HR, they cleaned out their desks afterward and picked up their final paycheck. The CEO, Mr. Caldwell, had unbelievably high expectations for everyone who worked here and didn’t accept anything less than perfection. At least, that was the claim from the most recent ex-employee who had been shown the door.

“No. But hey, maybe she’s going to give you a big promotion,” Pete joked.

“I haven’t been here long enough. Do you think someone told her I was late getting in this morning?”

Pete placed his hand on her arm and gave it a quick squeeze of encouragement. “Don’t worry. You do great work. There’s no reason to assume it’s something bad.”

Brianna nodded silently as she stacked the copies together then stapled them.

“So,” Pete continued. “Do you want to grab a bite to eat after work? My treat.” Pete had been trying to get her to go out with him since she started working for Caldwell Enterprises, but so far, she had given him one excuse after another. He was a nice enough guy, but she just wasn’t into him that way. In truth, she’d been too focused on her job to be into any guy that way lately. And Pete made her a little uncomfortable with how hard he pressed the matter, never taking her “no” as a final answer.

To dissuade him and other would-be office suitors, she’d done her best to look ordinary. Most of the guys she knew wanted eye-candy to take around town, so instead she wore her long coppery-brown hair in a matronly bun at the nape of her neck and dressed in the most unflattering, shapeless, thrift-store clothes she could find. She never wore makeup aside from lip gloss, and her only perfume was her strawberry-scented shampoo. She’d thought that would be enough to keep the guys away, but it hadn’t gotten the job done yet.

Finished, Brianna grabbed her papers and squeezed past Pete to exit the copy room, still worried about her HR summons.

Pete followed her back to her desk, and she realized she’d never answered him. “I can’t. I promised my mom I’d come by and see her after work tonight.” She quickly placed the copies into the appropriate folders, glancing at Pete when he lingered.

“No problem. We could stop by there before we went to eat.”

He was eager to date her. Brianna knew that. But her previous relationships had ended badly, and she had enough on her plate taking care of her mom and paying her own bills. The last thing she needed was the stress of trying to please a guy on top of everything else. Not that she was capable of that particular act—according to her last boyfriend, anyway. “Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think so.”

“Brianna, come on. You never go out with us on Friday nights. You say you don’t have a boyfriend right now. I don’t understand what the problem is.” Pete sounded exasperated, but that was too bad.

She didn’t owe him an explanation. She didn’t owe him anything.

Brianna stepped back around her desk and headed for the elevator. “Pete, I would prefer we just stay friends. I don’t have time for anything else. I’ll see you later.” As the elevator doors closed, Brianna saw the look of disappointment on his face but refused to feel guilty. He would get over it, and she was proud of herself for standing her ground.

She smiled, hopeful that Pete had finally gotten the message. Work would be easier without having to fend off advances. She had enough to worry about these days without a new relationship. No. The last thing she needed right now was another disappointed man, like her ex-boyfriend Todd, on her hands.

Once she’d reached her destination, however, her confident smile faded. Why had she been summoned to Mrs. Marshall’s office? She hadn’t broken any rules in the employee handbook, and she’d only been two minutes late this morning. Surely, they wouldn’t fire someone for two minutes?

It wasn’t even her fault. The light-rail had arrived on time, but then some guy had ridden his bike in front of the train. Thankfully, no one had been hurt, but by the time the driver had resolved the situation, they were behind schedule.

Seated now in the bland, beige HR waiting area, her stomach was knotted with tension. She couldn’t afford to lose this job. The next monthly payment for her mother’s nursing care was due in two weeks and she had barely enough to cover the cost

Since her mother's stroke seven months ago, Brianna had been forced to quit school and find a job to cover the cost of her mother's long-term care. The secretarial position at Caldwell Enterprises had been like an early Christmas gift. She earned enough to cover her mother's expenses, the rent on a room at the little rundown motel on the other side of town, and still had a few dollars for food. She couldn't lose this job.

"Mrs. Marshall is ready for you," the receptionist said. "You can go on in."

Brianna gave a nod and walked to the door. After a brief knock, she entered then closed the door behind her. If she was about to be fired, she didn't want anyone else to hear about it until she'd left the building.

Mrs. Marshall glanced up at her and smiled, then gestured toward the two overstuffed chairs in front of her desk. "Brianna, thanks for coming up so quickly. Please, have a seat while I get this paperwork sorted out."

Brianna sat primly on the edge of her seat with her hands in her lap, trying hard not to fidget. Nervous energy pulsed through her system making her already thudding pulse skip.

Janet straightened the last of the file in front of her and then looked up at Brianna again. "Tell me how things have been going."

"I really like working here, Mrs. Marshall," answered Brianna, her tone quiet.

"Please, call me Janet. Mrs. Marshall sounds like my mother-in-law," Janet said, with a wink. Brianna gave her a weak nod in return, not sure what to say to that.

"You're probably wondering why I called you up here in the middle of the day. A family emergency has taken the CEO's executive assistant away, and he needs an immediate replacement. I've had nothing but good reports from your supervisors, so I'm recommending you for the job."

Wait. What? Brianna struggled to comprehend the news. "Mrs. Marshall. I mean, Janet. Am I being promoted already?"

“I realize this is unorthodox and goes against company policy of a nine month wait period prior to advancement.” Janet sat forward and clasped her hands on the desk. “But it’s an unusual situation. His assistant’s daughter was injured and has newborn twins. Pam is going to stay with her until things return to normal. From what I understand, she does plan to return at some point, so this situation won’t be permanent.”

“So, it’s like a vacation fill-in?”

“Yes and no. You’ll be filling in for Pam while she’s gone, but you may be the one who needs a vacation after you spend a week working with Trent.”

“Trent Caldwell. That’s who I’ll be working for?” Brianna frowned. She’d heard the rumors, same as everyone else. His father had been grooming him to take over the family business since he was in high school. The elder Caldwell had been much beloved by everyone he came in contact with and had tried to encourage that same level of commitment and loyalty for his son. However, less savory rumors suggested that the younger Caldwell had broken away from his father’s business methods, choosing a more ruthless approach that left his staff more cowed than committed. All the same, he was a dynamic, compelling figure. At age thirty-one, the CEO of Caldwell Enterprises was one of Denver’s most eligible bachelors. Trent Caldwell never lacked for female companionship and was never seen with the same woman for more than a couple weeks. The fact he was richer than Croesus didn’t hurt either.

Janet sat back in her chair and narrowed her gaze. “Trent works hard and expects the same dedication from everyone around him. He’s also a perfectionist and expects complete honesty, but on the rare occasions when he makes a mistake, be careful how you correct him. His ego is as big as his bank account.”

Shocked, Brianna blinked at Janet. “Should you be saying that about the man who’ll be my new boss?”

“Our fathers grew up together, and he’s good friends with my husband. I’ve known Trent probably longer than anyone else, so I’m allowed a bit of leeway where he’s concerned.” Janet

leaned forward again, her expression concerned. “You’re a good employee, Brianna, and I want you to go into this with your eyes wide open. The job will be tough and demanding, but the rewards will be great.” She paused. “Do you think you can handle it?”

Brianna took a moment to consider her options. There’d been no mention of increased pay or benefits for her time in the new position, but in the end, it was a no-brainer. The prestige alone of putting “Executive Assistant to CEO Trent Caldwell” on her resume would be worth it. “Yes.”

“Excellent. Trent expects you right after lunch today. He’s in the middle of contract negotiations and needs the corrections made before three o’clock. Pam left before they could be completed. It’s eleven now, so maybe you could take an early lunch break. That would give you a few extra minutes to get things sorted out upstairs.”

“Sure. Where exactly am I headed when I get back?”

“Pam’s desk is in the foyer outside Trent’s office. His suite encompasses the entire top floor.” Janet pulled a special key card from her desk and handed it to Brianna. “The top floor is only accessible with that. You’ll see a slot on the panel in the elevator. Slide the card through and it will take you upstairs. Oh, and I’ll need you to sign these forms for Payroll so they can adjust your salary.”

“Adjust my salary?” Brianna’s heart raced and her hands shook as she read through the forms. Her new salary was three times what she made now. Relief flooded her system. She wouldn’t have to worry about money, at least for the next couple of weeks. She looked up at Janet with wide eyes. “Is this right?”

“Keep reading.” Janet grinned. “It’s a great opportunity, and well-earned. Just sign where I’ve indicated, I’ll send everything down to Payroll immediately. You should see the increase starting with this Friday’s check.”

“This week? Really?” Brianna scribbled her name on several dotted lines, then handed the papers back. “Is that all?”

Janet nodded.

Brianna stood and had made it almost to the door when Janet called to her. “One more thing. Don’t take any guff from Trent. Tell him I said to be nice, or he’ll answer to me. His bark is much worse than his bite, I promise.”

In a daze, Brianna went back to her old office to collect her things. She didn’t exactly feel comfortable telling her new boss to “be nice”. Even if the rumors and what Janet had said about him were true.

Grabbing her bag and her lunch, she turned to leave and almost bumped into Pete who was standing way too close to her desk. He reached out to steady her and she took a step back before he could touch her.

“Where are you going? To lunch already? Maybe I’ll join you.”

Stepping around the other side of her desk, “I’ve been given a temporary promotion to work with Mr. Caldwell upstairs.”

“That’s great. We have to go celebrate. You can’t say no now.”

He sounded way too pushy, and Brianna’s stomach sank as she realized he hadn’t been deterred from his pursuit of her after all. Maybe that would be an added benefit of this promotion. It would be easier to avoid him from her new office.

“Look Pete, you’re a nice guy, but I’m not interested in dating anyone right now, and I have my hands full with my mom. Thank you for the offer, but I’m not interested.” Without waiting for his response, Brianna shouldered past him and headed toward the elevator, hoping he wouldn’t follow.

Brianna made a quick stop at the ladies' room to make sure her hair was still neatly collected at the nape of her neck and her attire was presentable. To save money, she packed her lunch every day and usually ate under one of the shade trees in front of the building. It also gave her a nice respite from being stuck indoors all day, at least when the weather cooperated.

Her thrift-store outfit left much to be desired, but on her limited budget, it was all she could afford. She only had five outfits that she deemed work appropriate, and this was one of them. The khaki skirt she wore billowed with extra material due to the pleats and reached nearly to her ankles. Then there was her button down shirt, a size too small and puckering slightly over her breasts, but beggars couldn't be choosers. She shrugged. It wasn't like Trent Caldwell would glance twice in her direction anyway. Not with the primped and painted beauties he'd been photographed with recently.

She looked at her toes, peeking out from beneath the hem of her skirt, and made a mental note to buff her shoes this evening. Made of sensible brown leather, their flat-soles made the trek from the light-rail stop to her small motel room bearable, but they looked old and worn—which they were.

Sighing, she reminded herself that while this new position was only temporary, someday money wouldn't always be so tight, she wouldn't always have to shop at the local thrift store, or live in the rundown motel across town. Someday things would get better; they had to be. There was nowhere left to go but up.

Shaking her head to clear it, she dabbed a bit of gloss on her lips, squared her shoulders, and headed to lunch. She needed to make a good impression on the CEO. The sunny outdoors beckoned, but Janet had mentioned a deadline. She could enjoy her lunch outside another time.

Pulling the key card from her pocket, she slid it through the elevator slot. She wasn't sure what type of contract corrections needed to be made, but she wanted to prove she could handle the job. Her peanut butter sandwich could wait.

When the elevator doors opened again, Brianna exited into a plush reception area complete with couches and chairs in small settings around the room. A large desk, along with several filing cabinets and bookshelves, occupied one corner of the room and she assumed that was her new work area.

The nameplate confirmed that Pam Whistler usually sat there, and Brianna placed her purse in an empty drawer then spied the neatly typed notes waiting on the desk. The office door behind her stood slightly ajar and she debated announcing her arrival, then decided to peruse the notes first so she'd be well acquainted with the job ahead.

Mr. Caldwell wasn't expecting her until after lunch, according to Janet, so she would use her extra time wisely. The last thing she wanted was to appear incompetent on her first meeting with her new boss.

Once she'd read through the notes, she sorted through the drawers and discovered a list of various passwords and computer program commands Pam had left in case of emergency. Brianna was grateful for the woman's foresight and thoroughness.

First, she pulled up Mr. Caldwell's calendar and saw he was free for the afternoon. Maybe she should knock or announce her presence. Or maybe he didn't want to be disturbed and she should wait until he asked to see her.

Undecided, she gazed around the vast space and spotted a portrait of a stately looking man hanging across the room. She got up to study it closer. The silver-haired man pictured had a sparkle in his eyes and a smile on his face that made her feel at

home. He reminded her of her grandfather who had passed away when she was eight. She hoped her new boss would be as nice as this man looked in the painting, whoever he was.

Returning to her desk, she continued to familiarize herself with the files in the drawers and came across one with the instructions on how to use the intercom system. In an effort to try out her new skills and to show initiative, Brianna decided paging Mr. Caldwell would be a perfect solution to her introduction problem. It would show him her initiative in learning his intercom system on her own, while still maintaining his privacy in his office. She picked up the phone and pushed the correct series of buttons.

She heard the resulting beep echo from behind the partially closed door, but instead of someone answering the page, the door flew open to reveal the most gorgeous man she had ever encountered. He'd been attractive in the photographs she'd seen, but in person, he was stunning. And instead of looking pleased over her accomplishments, he looked irritated.

Trent stopped abruptly at the sight of the strange, prim woman sitting behind his assistant's desk. He'd expected to see his current girlfriend, Chelsea, thinking somehow she'd convinced security to let her up to his office again. He'd cancelled their date to the symphony last night to concentrate on the upcoming acquisition. She'd been less than pleased, and he fully expected that the next time he saw her, she'd throw a full-blown tantrum.

If Pam were here, he'd have had her stop by the jewelry store and purchase some appropriate bauble that said, "I'm sorry" and "It's been nice, but it's over." Pam always had excellent taste and didn't mind spending his money. In fact, she seemed to take great joy in telling him that if he was going to have affairs and then expect somebody else to do the cleanup, he shouldn't complain about spending ten thousand dollars on what she mockingly referred to as their severance package.

But instead of model-thin, high-society Chelsea, he now stared at a young woman with wide eyes and an astonished expression. Her brown hair was scraped into a severe bun at the nape of her neck, and her pale skin, though flawless, didn't show a speck of cosmetics.

A few feet now separated them. Across the small span, he could see her eyes were almost gray, and a fine sprinkle of freckles dotted the bridge of her nose. Her mouth, still agape, looked soft and inviting, but on the whole, Trent decided she was passably average at best.

His gaze continued down her body to her clothes, and he barely suppressed a cringe. Her neat button-down shirt and khaki skirt spoke of thrift store, not Saks Fifth Avenue. As he stepped closer, she hung up the phone and stood, bumping into the chair she hadn't scooted back far enough. With a small gasp, she rubbed her hip and moved away from the desk.

Trent's eyes were drawn to the small movement, and his opinion of her changed. Her clothing might not be anything spectacular, but the figure beneath them certainly was.

A little on the thin side, her hips still flared nicely and the curve of her ass was just visible through the folds of material masquerading as clothing.

Directing his gaze upward once more, Trent noticed her shirt straining to stay closed around her breasts, the buttons threatening to pop if she breathed too hard. Her considerable charms were completed by a tiny waist and slender shoulders cleverly disguised under her ill-suited attire.

He stood at least a foot taller than her, which would make her about five-four, and unlike the other women he knew, she didn't wear three-inch stilettos. Instead, her feet were covered by the ugliest pair of brown flats he had ever seen.

"Who are you?" Trent did his best to curb the impatience in his voice. He still needed to finish reviewing the contract before lunch so the new secretary could get it fixed this afternoon. Interruptions were not part of his agenda.

"Um...Janet...I mean Mrs. Marshall sent me up here." Her soft, smoky tone sent a tingle of awareness through his body. "She said you needed a replacement for Pam?"

Trent drew closer. She looked young and unsure. This couldn't have been the powerhouse Janet had spoken to him about, could it? "How old are you?"

She drew herself up a little straighter, "Twenty-four, sir."

"Stop with the 'sir' crap. I'm not my father." It made him feel old, and he was not happy with reminders of his age.

"Yes, si..." She seemed to catch herself and fumbled, as if unsure how to address him now.

A pretty pink blush colored her cheeks, and he smiled, for what seemed like the first time in days. “Call me Trent. Not Mr. Caldwell, just Trent.”

Brianna only nodded at his statement. She couldn't bring herself to say it. Calling the CEO of such a large company by his first name was too informal. Maybe she would just call him Mr. Caldwell anyway. She felt much more comfortable with that title.

"I see you found Pam's instructions?" Trent stepped closer to the desk, and she caught the scent of his aftershave—cedar and spice and warm, clean male. Not a combination she normally found appealing, but on him, it seemed to fit.

He stepped closer still, close enough for her to feel the heat of him through her thin cotton shirt, and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other then forced herself to remain still. She didn't want him to know he made her nervous.

The longer she stood there, however, the more awkward she felt. She struggled to keep from fidgeting. This was his first impression of her, after all, and she wanted to make it a positive one.

"I believe I asked a question that requires an answer, Miss...?"

"Daughtry. Brianna Daughtry." Heat prickled her cheeks as she realized she'd forgotten to introduce herself. Trent took her proffered hand and an electric current zapped up her arm and straight between her legs from the brief contact. She pulled away fast, as if burned. This man was not the kind, gentle man whose picture hung across the office. This was someone more. So much more. "Mr. Caldwell."

“Okay, Brianna.” He held her stare, until she looked down and away. “And again, the name is Trent.”

Brianna did her best to calm her racing heart at his subtle reprimand. “Sorry, Mr. Caldwell. I mean...” Jeez, what the heck was wrong with her? She couldn’t seem to even form a simple sentence around this man. “Uh... I mean Trent.”

“Now, was that so hard?” he grinned.

“No.” *Yes.*

He gave her another pointed look, then picked up the sheaf of papers lying on her desk. He flipped through them and nodded. “Looks like Pam’s done a remarkable job, as always.”

Brianna kept quiet, not sure what to say. The phone on the desk rang, and she almost raised her hands in a prayer of thanks for the distraction. Before she could answer it though, he walked around the desk and grabbed the receiver, his gaze locked on hers. “Trent Caldwell.”

“Hello, Janet.” Trent nodded, “Yes, Miss Daughtry is already here. Standing in front of me, in fact.”

The amusement in his tone brought a fresh wave of heat to Brianna’s cheeks. He raised a brow in her direction and she doubted he spent much time in the company of women who blushed. His gaze seemed to follow the heat beneath her skin, down below the collar of her shirt.

“Yes.” He said into the phone, nodding. “Uh-huh. Okay. Yes, sure.”

He turned away slightly and growled something into the receiver that sounded suspiciously like a curse. Brianna’s eyes widened.

Trent’s focus snapped back to her, his gaze narrowed and he hung up the phone. “Janet tells me you’re here because she has every confidence that you can do the job correctly. Is that true?”

Brianna nodded “She said you have a contract that needs to be fixed before three o’clock today?”

“Yes. I’ll go get the changes to be made and e-mail you the contract file to work from. I’ll expect to see a finished, corrected copy on my desk when I return from lunch.”

“Of course.” Brianna squared her shoulders as he returned to his office. Several moments later, he came back out with the contract documents. His movements were stealthy and quiet, like a panther stalking its prey, and she found herself studying him from beneath her lashes while he leaned over to toss the papers on her desk. He towered at least a foot taller than her and was built like a fine Greek statue, with his broad shoulders and narrow waist and hips.

Trent stepped back, and Brianna lowered her eyes to the papers now in front of her.

“I need the changes marked in red fixed in the electronic file I sent you just now. Then print out ten copies and place them on my desk. I shouldn’t be more than an hour. Oh, and do us both a favor, check your work for mistakes. I won’t be happy if we have to correct it again and make more copies.”

“Yes, Trent.” Brianna swallowed hard as he gave her another enigmatic look and then left via the elevator. Once he was gone, she spent the next several minutes pulling herself together before getting to work.

At least a quick look through the document showed there weren’t that many corrections, so hopefully she could get it all done in time.

After pulling up the document on her desktop and making the necessary corrections, she proofread everything one more time, then sent it to the nearby printer. While she waited for the job to complete, she stretched her arms over her head to release some of the pent-up tension in her shoulders and a button popped off her shirt. Glancing down, she realized it was the one right over her breasts. Of course. She scoured the carpet around her, hoping to locate the missing clear plastic button.

A quick glance at the clock showed Trent would be back soon, so she gave up her search. The printer beeped, and she grabbed the heavy stack of documents off the tray. She placed them

neatly on the center of his desk, then returned to try and find her missing button. On her hands and knees, she finally found it under the far corner of the desk.

She'd just managed to grab the button when she heard the unmistakable sound of the elevator doors opening. Cringing, she debated about whether to stay under the desk and hope that he wouldn't see her, or crawl out as quickly as possible and act as if nothing had happened.

Before she could make up her mind, however, a pair of black, shiny dress shoes appeared in her line of vision, standing about a foot away from her knees. "What on earth are you doing?"

Mortified, Brianna wished the floor would swallow her whole. She started to scoot out from under the desk, but then a new problem presented itself. Her skirt was stuck. Frozen in place, she had no idea how she was going to extricate herself from this mess with her dignity intact.

Things got much worse when Trent leaned over and peered under the desk at her, his expression exasperated. "Are you planning on staying there the rest of the day, Miss Daughtry?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but words refused to come. Finally, he straightened, grumbling to himself, and she hung her head. Definitely the worst work day ever.

At last his feet moved away and she tracked them to the door of his office. "When you do decide to come out, please join me in my office."

By the time she appeared at Trent's door several minutes later, it appeared his new secretary had straightened her clothes, let down her hair, and now held a pad and pen over the center of her chest, looking capable and prepared for duty.

"Sit." He gestured toward the chairs in front of his desk, not lifting his eyes from the contract. So far, she'd accurately fixed all of the errors he'd marked.

Trent was impressed by how quickly she'd accomplished the task. Glancing up, he was struck again with her unassuming beauty. Beneath the overhead lights, her hair glowed like polished copper, and with it down around her shoulders, she looked even younger and sexier. Once again he tried to clear his thoughts. She obviously had no idea of the effect she had on men. Or at least *this* man.

Her cheeks were still slightly pink from her earlier embarrassment, which only served to highlight the freckles across her nose. He noticed how even now that she was seated, she still had that same pen and paper clutched to her chest like a shield. Interesting. He raised his eyes and found her watching him. "These are fine. I have two more files that need to be proofed and then ten copies made of them as well. If you have any questions, mark the documents and send them to me. Hand me your pad."

"I can't." Brianna cringed. "I'm sorry."

"Miss Daughtry, is there a problem that I am unaware of?"

"No, sir. I mean...Trent, there's no problem."

“Then hand that pad over so I can write down the link to access the documents you need to work on.” Trent crooked an impatient finger at her. “C’mon. Let’s have it.”

With a sigh, she tossed the pad at him, then quickly crossed her arms over her chest. Trent raised an eyebrow at her strange reaction. He wrote the web address down on her pad, watching her as he did so. Finishing, he handed the pad back to her, but held it just out of her reach to make her grab it. Childish? Perhaps. But he wanted to find out what she was hiding. He didn’t like people keeping secrets from him, especially his employees.

After several failed attempts to get the pad, she finally gave up and reached for it, exposing the reason for her earlier actions. She’d lost a button on her shirt. The opening allowed him a tantalizing view of soft skin and a pale pink bra trimmed with lace. Another delectable flush stained her cheeks, but he wisely held his tongue as she covered herself with the notepad again.

“Will there be anything else, Trent?” she asked, her gaze lowered.

Part of him felt bad about staring at her like that. He wasn’t some leech, desperate for female attention, and she was his assistant. The other part of him knew he’d remember that innocent glimpse of her creamy flesh for many nights to come. He cleared his constricted throat and shook his head. “That will be all.”

Brianna quickly headed for the door before he stopped her. “Pam keeps a sewing kit in her desk, I’m pretty sure. Make sure to use it before you leave today.”

“Okay. Yes. Thanks.”

Trent looked up and smiled when she just stood there. “That’s all.”

She nodded and left, closing the door behind her. He sat back in his seat and grinned.

Perhaps the next several weeks with his new assistant wouldn’t be so horrendous after all.

Several hours later, Trent exited his office only to stop short. “I thought I told you to fix your shirt.”

Brianna looked up from the computer screen. She’d gotten so wrapped up in her work that she’d forgotten. “What? Oh, yes. I’ll fix it, I promise. I just wanted to get these new documents finished first.”

Trent retreated to his office again, his expression perplexed.

Brianna exhaled, finished the document she was working on, then sent it to the printer. After collecting the copies, she took them to Trent’s office. After knocking once on the partially closed door, she pushed it open to find him behind his desk on his cell phone. She quietly entered and placed the finished documents on the corner of his desk.

As she turned to leave, he clamped a hand over the phone and said to her, “Brianna, wait a moment.”

Brianna remained where she was, halfway between his desk and the office door while he finished his conversation, doing her best not to eavesdrop.

“Fine. Yes, meet me tomorrow for lunch—we need to talk.” He hung up and stared at Brianna. “On your way in tomorrow, please stop off at Godfrey’s department store and talk to George. Tell him Pam is out of the office and you are filling in for her. Have him help you pick out some jewelry for Chelsea and box it up for you, then bring it to my office.”

Brianna tried to keep her surprise from showing, but if his raised brow was any indication, she'd failed. "I'm sorry, you want me to pick up a present for someone named Chelsea?"

"Yes. Go to Godfrey's, ask for George, pick up some jewelry for Chelsea, and bring it in with you tomorrow. Clear?"

"Who's Chelsea? If I'm to pick out something appropriate, I need more information."

"Chelsea is my soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend. Make sure it's equal in value to whatever I got for her birthday last month. George should be able to help you with that."

"You don't remember what you gave her for her birthday?"

Now it was Trent's turn to look surprised. "Why would I? Pam picked it out. Listen, Chelsea will go quietly with the right gift, and I don't have time for any female hysterics right now."

The man's sheer audacity and cluelessness stunned her. He thought that an expensive gift would buy off his girlfriend and she would just fade into the woodwork without a complaint? "Trent...I really think you might be in a better position to buy your girlfriend such an intimate gift yourself."

"I don't have time for that." Trent stared her down, as if daring her to keep arguing.

Brianna simply nodded and hoped that George, whoever he was, could indeed help her out. "Fine. I'll stop by and see George in the morning. Your contracts are finished, and as it's already past five o'clock, I'm going home."

Brianna turned and walked out, not waiting for his reply.



Three hours later, Brianna dragged herself back to the motel room, thankful that Jack, the motel's owner, hadn't been on duty. After dealing with her new boss and his unusual errand requests, she had taken the light-rail straight to the nursing facility, only to find her mother asleep and back on oxygen due to a cold she'd caught earlier in the week.

Brianna had been under the impression that her mother was on the mend, but the infection had taken a turn for the worse. She'd sat by the bedside and related the events of the day to her mother. Several of the nursing staff had come by and chatted with her briefly, and at eight, she had finally headed back across town and to the small room she currently called home.

Yawning, Brianna brushed her hair before climbing into bed and closing her eyes. She was tired beyond belief and knew the coming days were going to test her abilities, in more ways than one.

As she lay there listening to the noise from the highway just beyond the parking lot of the motel, she thought of the new increase in her salary and resolved to deal with her new boss in a professional and calm manner in the future, regardless of the fact the current CEO was nothing like she had ever experienced before.

He was devastatingly handsome and his eyes lit up when he was amused. She just wished his amusement wasn't directed at her. It was going to be difficult enough working around someone who had her thinking about things other than work.

“Another peanut butter sandwich?” Trent stood over his new assistant’s desk and watched her fumble with her crumpled napkin. They’d been working together for five days now, and he had yet to see her eat anything besides a homemade sandwich always packed inside the same brown paper bag. The same exact brown paper bag, judging from some of the stains on it. Did she love peanut butter that much? Or was there something else going on? He frowned. He paid his assistants well, but maybe she needed more funds. Beneath his steady stare, her cheeks colored and she swallowed hard.

“I just needed a bite of something to tide me over. All I’ve had today was a breakfast bar on the train in this morning,” she said, still not looking at him. Across her desk were scattered copies of the meeting notes he’d asked her to type up for his one o’clock appointment. As if sensing his thoughts, she finally glanced up at him. “Don’t worry—I’ll have them finished in time.”

“I wasn’t worried.” His frown deepened as he headed toward his office. “And make sure you take your lunch today. I don’t want to get cited for harsh working conditions.”

He closed the door behind him and strode to his desk, distracted. Was he really such a slave driver that his new assistant was afraid to step away, even for a short meal? He was well aware of his reputation as being a difficult man to work for. Most days, he cultivated it. Better to be thought too strict than a pushover, his dad had always taught him. But Pam had always been in on the joke. She’d dished his snotty

remarks right back at him with a healthy side portion of don't-tread-on-me. This new girl though. She seemed too timid, too eager to please, and far too proper to ever consider talking back to him. Why did all that bother him?

She was a puzzle he found himself drawn to solve. She was extremely conservative, with her tightly wound bun and very little makeup. So different from the women he usually kept company with. Then, the last time he'd taken some documents out to her desk, he'd noticed her fragrance—strawberries and cinnamon and a hint of warm, clean woman. Highly improper things for a boss to be noticing about his employee, but around her he couldn't seem to help himself.

Professionally, he had to admit Janet was right. Brianna was more than competent to fill in for Pam. She'd even gotten a more than wonderful parting gift for Chelsea—a neatly boxed diamond and platinum tennis bracelet. Her attitude has been priceless, too. He remembered her setting the wrapped gift on his desk the next morning and bluntly informing him that he should plan on buying future gifts himself, as she would not be doing so again. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands over his flat stomach. Maybe the woman had some fire after all.

She hadn't waited for his reply, the color in her cheeks high. She'd simply returned to her desk and started working. When Chelsea had arrived later for their lunch date, Brianna had shown her into the office and then vanished without a word.

Trent pictured her now, seated at her desk, studiously working on his notes. Then he remembered her threadbare clothes and crappy lunches and reached for his phone, wanting to confirm a few details about his new assistant with HR.

“Trent?” Janet answered. “What's up? How's Brianna working out?”

“She's doing fine. What do you know about her?”

“What do you want to know?” He could hear the smile in her voice.

Trent thought for a moment before answering, “First I want to confirm that she’s receiving the same salary and benefits that Pam got.”

“Of course.” Janet’s tone turned suspicious. “Why?”

“She’s just...different.” Trent tapped his fingers on the desk. “What else can you tell me about her? Where’d she come from? Where does she live? Does she have family?”

“I can send her file up for you, if you’d like.”

“No.” He sat back again and rubbed his eyes, thinking of the mysterious girl outside his office door. “I want you to tell me what’s *not* in the file.”

“Oh.” Janet hesitated, and he could picture the wheels turning in her head. “Do you have any specific questions?” He could hear her tapping the keys on her keyboard, and he decided to wait her out rather than answer. Janet was a smart woman, and she had to wonder at his line of questioning. He contemplated if she was seeing this as sexual attraction to his new assistant. He wouldn’t put it past her to make an attempt at matchmaking given her strong opinions of the women he normally dated. But this time, there was something more, something haunted about Brianna Daughtry that made him genuinely concerned for her. The tapping of computer keys stopped as Janet apparently brought up Brianna’s personnel files. “Well, let’s see. I don’t recognize the address, but it’s in Federal Heights...”

“What?” Federal Heights was known for its gangs and violence. Most people avoided it, especially after dark.

“That’s what it says. Federal Heights. She has a mother, Angela Daughtry, listed here as next of kin, but the emergency contact is a nursing home over in Aurora. Maybe her mother works there? I don’t have much more information about her other than she was a student at UNC, but never graduated. Why do you want to know?”

Trent was asking himself that same question. “I don’t know. She’s a puzzle.”

Janet laughed. “Sounds like she got under your skin.”

“No one gets under my skin. I was just curious.”

Trent stepped back out of his office as Brianna hung up the phone. This was the first time he'd seen her smile—a real, seemingly genuine smile. It lit up her entire face. His chest pinched with an odd combination of awareness and envy. Awareness over the pure loveliness of her face and envy for the person who'd brought the transformation about. He wished it had been him. “Care to share what has you smiling?”

Startled, Brianna whirled in her chair to face him so quickly she banged her knee on the inside edge of the desk. “Ouch!”

“Sorry.” Trent winced in sympathy. “I didn't mean to scare you.” Without thinking, he moved closer and knelt in front of her raising the hem of her long khaki skirt to assess her injured knee. “Here. Let me see.”

Brianna stiffened at the first touch of his hand, then seemed to relax slightly as Trent rubbed his palm over her bruised skin. He looked up into her stormy gray eyes and found himself getting lost in their depths. He blinked and looked away, desperate to keep some semblance of professionalism between them despite the situation. Her expression had gone somewhat cloudy and dazed and her cheeks were deathly pale. For a moment, Trent feared she might pass out on him. Surely she hadn't whacked her knee that hard, had she? With his best authoritative tone, he asked, “Brianna, are you okay? Brianna?”

Trent stilled his hand on her knee. She stared at him, but she didn't appear to hear him. Worried, he raised his fingers to her

chin and tipped her head up to look into her eyes. When she licked her lips, he couldn't help watching her tongue peek out from between her lips. Desire surged through him and he fought the urge to close the small gap between them and kiss her.

Stunned, Trent pushed to his feet and backed away. This was so far beyond inappropriate, he couldn't even begin to imagine the liability. Theirs was a professional relationship and that's exactly how it needed to stay.

Brianna continued to stare at him blankly for several seconds before lowering her gaze and straightening her skirt. When her eyes met his again, it was as if the last few minutes had never happened. She was back to her usual efficient, prim self and he was eternally grateful. She raised an inquiring copper-colored brow in his direction and gave him a bland smile. "Did you require something else?"

"No." Trent raked a hand through his hair and marveled at her ability to shut off her emotions. She'd felt the connection between them, he'd seen it in the spark of heat in her eyes and heard it in the catch of her breath. Yet now, she was as cool as a cucumber. He shook his head. "Forget it."

"Okay." She swiveled away and mumbled, "Consider it forgotten."

At her slightly snarky tone, his admiration switched to astonishment. "What did you just say?"

She turned back to face him again, a slight glint in her eyes. "I asked if you needed something."

Trent took a long deep breath to steady his racing pulse. Maybe he was losing it, after all these years. Maybe he'd simply imagined the hint of teasing backbone in his otherwise mousy assistant. "I need you to work for a few hours tomorrow afternoon, if possible. The company representatives are flying in Saturday morning from Germany and I'll need you on hand to make any changes to the contracts. Will that be a problem?"

A look of disappointment crossed her face before it quickly disappeared. “I guess not. What time did you want me to come in?”

Trent frowned. He hated asking people to come in over the weekend, but this deal was too important to jeopardize. She didn't look thrilled, but maybe he'd give her an extra hour or so off next week to make up the difference. He hoped this negotiation would be over by then, and he would only have to sign the final paperwork once he arrived in Frankfurt. “Good. We should be ready to start at one o'clock, so you should get here by noon. Call the deli downstairs and have the usual spread delivered then. They'll know how to set things up in the conference room and get everything ready by the time our guests arrive.”

Brianna took notes as he continued to outline the other items she needed to handle in advance of the Saturday meeting. As Trent headed back into his office, he reminded her, “Be sure to tell security you'll be coming in tomorrow. I don't know how long things will take, but we should wrap up by dinnertime.”

“Will do.” Brianna nodded. “And if it's okay with you, I'd like to leave a little early today, after I get all this set up, since I'll be working tomorrow.”

“Fine. If I don't see you before you leave, have a good night Brianna.”

After leaving the office, Brianna made the trip to the nursing home and was pleased to see her mother feeling much better and off the oxygen. She spent several hours reading to her again, then watched a video with her before promising to see her tomorrow for dinner.

Just after ten that night, Brianna stepped off the light-rail and walked the two blocks to the motel. She normally didn't arrive so late, but she'd lost track of time.

As she walked past the front office, she noticed Jack was on duty and quickened her step, not wanting to draw his attention. When she'd first moved in, he'd made a point of being around when she got home, even going so far as to block the walkway when she tried to scoot past. Also, there were a couple times when she could have sworn he'd been in her room while she wasn't there. The only time she was almost late on her rent, he had offered her an alternative option instead of paying and after declining, she'd hurried back to her room and contemplated taking a shower with disinfectant. In that moment, Brianna vowed never to be late on rent—and she never had.

She'd crossed the parking lot to avoid the front office and had almost made it to her room, when she heard footsteps. Thinking it was Jack, she turned around, prepared to decline his anticipated advances.

Instead, two men moved quickly toward her. Swallowing hard, Brianna realized she wouldn't make it to her room in time.

Dry mouthed, her heart raced and her pulse pounded loud in her ears and she started to run but was brutally hit from behind and knocked to the ground. Her head struck the concrete and everything went black.

When she came to, she found herself lying on the concrete while two men circled each other, each having a knife trained on the other. They were arguing, but she couldn't make out the words with her ears ringing. Getting to her knees, she crawled toward the building, pulling her purse and other items with her.

A glance ahead showed she was about eight feet from her room. If she could make it that far, she could get inside and call the police. She scrambled faster in that direction, then held back a groan and wiped the stinging liquid from her eyes. Brianna pulled her hand back to see it covered in blood.

Eyes closed, she fumbled ahead until she reached her room and managed to get the door open before collapsing inside. Kicking out with her foot, she closed the door behind her, knowing it would lock automatically. From the floor, she reached up and pulled the phone off the nightstand. She dialed 911, gave them the motel's address, then curled up in a ball next to the bed to wait. Her head ached as dizziness overtook her and she willed the nausea away.

What seemed like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes later, police sirens wailed from outside, and someone pounded on her door. Brianna struggled to her feet and opened the door to a uniformed police officer who took one look at her and radioed for an ambulance.

Brianna tried to tell the officer she didn't need medical attention, but then he suggested she take a look in the mirror. Brianna swallowed against the bile rising in her throat and limped to the small dresser against the wall. Blood streamed from a gash on her forehead, and she was covered in dirt and abrasions. Her vision tunneled and the officer rushed to her side as her knees failed her.

The ride to the hospital was uneventful and the emergency personnel treated her with kindness and even offered to call

someone to sit with her. Except she didn't have anyone, other than her mother in the nursing home. She didn't miss the nurse's look of pity.

Later, a doctor came in and pronounced she had a slight concussion and would need to spend the night in the hospital or call someone to collect her who could keep watch over her through the night.

Tears welled in her eyes and the pain in Brianna's head was worse than anything she could remember. Trent would fire her for sure when she didn't show up for work tomorrow. Her mother would get kicked out of the nursing home, and she would be homeless when she couldn't pay the rent on her crummy hotel room. Or worse, she would have to deal with another offer from Jack. Her emotions quickly swirled into full out panic mode as she tried to process all of the repercussions from tonight's little adventure.

The attending physician gave her a small smile then signaled for a nurse to sit with her. He patted Brianna on the foot on the way out. "I need to make a few calls. You sit tight."

Brianna sniffled and watched him go. Sit tight? Didn't seem like she had much choice at the moment.

Trent scowled as his phone rang. Looking at the time, he answered the phone, “Yes?”

“Mr. Caldwell, this is security. I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but we received a call from Denver General Hospital, and they need the emergency contact information on one of our employees. Evidently the person is unable to provide them this information and is in the emergency room.”

Trent sat up. “Did they give you the employee’s name?”

“Yes. It’s Brianna Daughtry.”

Trent nearly dropped the phone, “Uh, thank you. I’ll take care of it. Denver General, did you say?”

“Yes, sir. What should I tell the doctor at the hospital?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m headed over there right now.” Trent hung up, grabbed his cell phone, and called his driver as he headed for the elevator. He wasn’t sure what had happened, but if there was no one else to take care of her, he wouldn’t leave her alone in the hospital.

As he rode down to the lobby, he wondered again why he was so concerned about his assistant. In the span of a week, she’d managed to get completely under his skin, and for the first time in his life, he found that he was oddly okay with that.

He arrived at the hospital about twenty minutes later and met with her attending physician first before allowing the man to lead him to Brianna’s room. The doctor had warned him that

she was bruised and battered and might be a little out of it, but nothing could have prepared him for the actual sight of her.

Looking entirely too small in her hospital bed, Brianna blinked her eyes open as he walked in the room. Her pallor matched the starched white sheets beneath her, and a large bandage covered the top portion of her head. Snarled knots of copper-colored hair tufted out from beneath the wrappings and dark circles smudged the delicate skin under her stormy gray eyes. He'd never wanted to hold anyone in his arms more in his life. Except he was her boss and she was his assistant and they had no real connection outside the office. He squared his shoulders and stepped up to her beside. "Brianna."

She promptly burst into tears, rambling incoherently about him not even waiting until Monday to fire her and that he'd come to the hospital to do it.

Alarmed, Trent looked to the doctor, who merely shook his head and grinned. The guy had cautioned him that Brianna was overly emotional and that patients suffering from a concussion could often have irrational responses. He had given Trent a prescription painkiller for her headaches, but declined providing a sedative as that could be dangerous with a concussion. His instructions were to keep her calm and wake her up every hour or so throughout the night to make sure there was no additional injury. From her current frantic display, he'd already failed at one of his tasks.

The doctor signaled him out into the hallway again and Trent followed with relief. Once outside Brianna's room, he asked, "Is that normal?"

"What, the hysterics?" The doctor grinned. "Yeah."

"Oh." Trent signed the appropriate paperwork, taking full responsibility for her welfare and advised the hospital to bill the charges to him. The paramedics who had transported Brianna were still hanging around the nurse's station and provided him a brief overview of her accident and the resulting arrests. Angry, Trent paced the hall while the nurses got Brianna ready for discharge. What had she been doing out alone in that neighborhood at that time of night anyway? Janet

had mentioned earlier that she had a Federal Heights address, but he'd assumed she had the good sense not to traipse around alone after dark in that part of town.

Once the nurses got her dressed, they signaled for Trent to return and he approached her bedside again cautiously. Tears still filled her eyes each time she saw him and he felt compelled to put her fears to rest. "Brianna, I know this is scary, but you need to calm down. Please don't cry." He took her hand. "I'm sure your head hurts something awful and the doctor gave you a prescription to help with that, but we'll need to get it filled on the way home first. I'm not exactly the ideal nursemaid, I know, but I'll take the best care of you I can."

Her sobs continued, harder than ever. "I'm...sor...sorry... please...don't...fire..."

Trent stared down at her, shocked. Here she was lying in a hospital, beaten and injured and she thought he'd come to fire her? What kind of heartless monster did she think he was? He squeezed her hand tighter. "Brianna, Brianna, shhh. I'm not going to fire you. No one's getting fired."

Brianna's breath hitched and her gaze narrowed. "N-n-no?"

"No." He shook his head and smiled. "Now let's get your coat on and see about getting a wheelchair up here so I can get you home."

He helped her put her arms in the sleeves of her jacket then buttoned it up. Once she was ready and a nurse brought in a wheelchair, he helped Brianna over to it then got her settled in the seat. As she arranged herself in the chair, he noticed her khaki skirt had a huge rip down the side and made himself a mental note to have Godfrey's send over some new clothes for her the next day.

"Ready to go?" the nurse asked.

"Ready." He straightened and pulled out his cell phone. "I'll have my driver meet us at the entrance."

They walked outside in silence, except for Brianna's occasional sniffing, and he kept a hand on her shoulder the whole time, as if needing the reassurance that she was still

alive and still okay. The thought of her alone and defenseless against those thugs had eaten a huge hole in his gut. His driver came around and helped him load Brianna into the backseat of his Bentley.

After the nurse took the wheelchair back inside and he slid onto the back seat beside Brianna, he gave the driver instructions to take them to the address listed in her employee file first. The driver gave him a wide-eyed look in the rearview mirror.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We won’t be staying.”

As the car pulled into the parking lot of the shabbiest motel Trent had ever seen, he looked around and wondered how she'd managed to survive here.

His longtime driver got out first to make sure the area was safe, then escorted Brianna and Trent to her room. Trent used her key to open the door and ushered her inside, turning on the light then wishing he hadn't.

Squalid. That was the word that sprang to his mind. The 1950s-print bedspread was threadbare, the orange shag carpeting stained, and the lighting was dim and dismal. The television, complete with rabbit-ear antennae, seemed to be from another era and was perched precariously on a TV stand that looked ready to topple over.

Brianna made her way to the bed and sat gingerly on the side. On a small table in the corner, Trent located the source of her daily lunches, a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter still sitting in a grocery bag.

Near what he assumed was the bathroom, a small stack of boxes sat in the corner. The meager contents of her wardrobe hung on a rack against the wall. This was probably everything she owned. The entirety of her sorry little life. Sadness and something else, something he didn't want to study too closely just now, rose within him and forced him to make a drastic decision. Brianna Daughtry would never spend one more minute in these horrid surroundings.

Calling to his driver, Trent instructed the man to load the boxes into the trunk of the car while he scooped up the personal items in the bathroom and dumped them in the empty suitcase he found beneath the garment rack. Next, he piled what little clothing she had into the luggage along with the contents of the dresser drawers, cringing at the fresh, bloody handprint on the top of the dresser.

As he gathered up her belongings, Trent kept an eye on Brianna, expecting a protest, then growing more concerned when she simply sat there watching him with a bemused expression. He needed to get her home, and she definitely needed rest and some pampering.

After assuring himself that all of her personal effects had been collected, he instructed his driver to take care of checking her out of this establishment, then he picked Brianna up in his arms and carried her back to the car.

The drive to his home in Highlands Ranch would take close to forty-five minutes and he settled into the seat, feeling both touched and pleased when she decided to use his shoulder as a pillow. Maybe she didn't think he was such a monster after all. Minutes later, the driver returned and handed Trent a receipt for the room then started the engine and took off. Trent shoved the stupid thing in his pocket without a glance and pulled Brianna tighter to his side.

Minutes ticked by and the driver raised the privacy screen, leaving him and his ward alone in the backseat. The car swerved around a corner, pressing Brianna tighter against him. She murmured something and nuzzled her face into his neck, her breath warm against his chilled skin. Despite the situation, sensual awareness shimmered through his bloodstream, and his body responded. Her arm slipped around his waist and her fingers dug into his side and Trent closed his eyes against the wave of lust crashing over him.

He refused to take advantage of her, not in her current condition. It would be wrong. But as the darkness surrounded them and the miles sped by, it became more difficult to remember his moral high ground, especially with her warm body snuggled up so nicely against him on this chilly night.

He reluctantly checked his watch and realized it was time to do a check in with her, to make sure she was all right. He gently nudged her on the shoulder and whispered in her ear. “Hey, no going to sleep now. At least, not until I get you home.”

Brianna mumbled something, and Trent’s pulse raced at the feel of her lips moving against his skin. With his fingers under her chin, he tipped her head up and her eyes fluttered open. “What was that?”

She merely blinked at him, all wide eyes and soft lips, and before he knew what he was doing, Trent lowered his head and touched his lips to hers.

At first, Brianna stiffened against him, then she melted into his chest as he gently explored her lips with his own, coaxing her to let him in. A soft moan escaped her and he took advantage, slipping his tongue inside her mouth to taste her, explore her.

Trent pulled her tighter against him, and his fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of her neck, careful to avoid her bandages and wounds. Gathering the long strands together, he moved them to one side to allow him to trace his lips down the side of her neck. Not only did she smell like strawberries, but he also registered with delight that she tasted like them, too. Rich and ripe and succulently ready. With his finger, he traced the open collar of her shirt then toyed with the button, knowing he should stop but unable to just yet.

Trent savored the silky feel of her skin beneath his hands, the sweet flavor of her in his mouth and the fragrance of her hair surrounding him before finally pulling away. Brianna gave a disappointed snuffle against his neck then drifted off to sleep again. He doubted she’d even remember this interlude in the morning, but he sure would.

Once they reached his house, Trent instructed his driver to unload Brianna’s belongings and stack them in the back hallway. She wouldn’t need anything tonight, and there’d be time enough to deal with them tomorrow.

After settling Brianna into one of the guest rooms, he made a few phone calls and arranged to have his second in command

handle the negotiations in the morning. The guy had sounded surprised by the order, and Trent couldn't blame him. He never delegated important tasks like that, but right now, he had his hands full with the woman upstairs. Then he called Janet to let her know what had happened and told her both he and Brianna would be off Monday. Janet offered to come over, but he declined, encouraging her to enjoy the weekend with her husband.

After ensuring everything was in place, he climbed the stairs once more to check on Brianna. His room was just next door, but as he took in her bedraggled appearance and banged up head, his protective instincts raged and he felt the need to have her closer, where he could keep an eye on her. It was a king-sized bed after all. They could both have their own half and still never meet in the middle. At least those were the excuses he was going with anyway.

After making sure she was all right, Trent slipped next door and took a quick shower then donned a pair of pajama pants before climbing into her huge bed. Before he shut off the lights, he set the alarm clock on his cell phone to wake him up at one hour intervals so he could check on her. She was his responsibility now, and he intended to take this job seriously.

Brianna struggled to open her eyes, groaning as the light sent shards of jagged pain through her head. Squinting, she turned away from the source of the light, and found herself face to face with a sleeping Trent Caldwell.

He was snoring softly and had one muscled arm wrapped possessively around the pillow next to hers. Even in her compromised state, the sight of his bare, muscled chest made her heart skip. As her eyes adjusted to the bright sunshine streaming through the windows, she took in more details. His chiseled jaw, covered now in a dark shadow of stubble, his tousled dark curls, and his long, sooty eyelashes that most women would murder for. Her fingertips itched to touch his skin, his lips, to see if he felt as good as he looked. But something niggled at the back of her consciousness, something wasn't quite right about this morning.

She stared at the ceiling and frowned. There'd been water stains up there yesterday, and since when did the lumpy mattress in her room feel this supportive and luxurious? Pressure built behind her temples and memories from the night before trickled back into her mind in flashes. The attack. The hospital. Trent. The car ride home. She gasped and scooted farther away from his still-snoozing form. Oh. My. God. The car ride home. He'd kissed her. She'd kissed him back. They'd made out like horny teens in the back of his car.

Fingers pressed to her tingling lips, Brianna closed her eyes and remembered what it had felt like to have his lips on hers. To have his hands stroke her body, to have his heat pressed so

tightly against her that she didn't know where her body stopped and his started. Speaking of bodies... She peeked beneath the sheets and saw that she was wearing only her bra and undies. Had he gotten her that way?

Fresh heat swamped her cheeks and she hiked the covers up to her chin.

“Good morning,” a husky, sleep-roughened male voice said from beside her. Trent. She hazarded a peek in his direction, then wished she hadn't as he rolled to his back and stretched, giving her a perfect view of his long, lean, perfectly muscled form. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Okay, I guess.” Her voice squeaked out, high-pitched and frail. “Um, how did I get here?”

His warm brown gaze turned serious. “You don't remember?”

“I remember parts of it. But I mean, how did I get *here*?” She scowled and gestured to the huge bed she was currently laying in then her body. “Like *this*?”

He took a deep breath and rolled over onto his back. “The hospital called me after your attack since you didn't have any emergency contacts. You do remember the attack, yes?”

Yeah, that she remembered. Brianna nodded, wincing at the movement.

“In order to release you, the hospital required someone to sign off as your caregiver. Since I was the one there, I took on the job.”

“And you brought me where?”

“To my house in Highlands Ranch.”

She started to fling back the covers to get to her feet, but the world tilted and her equilibrium faltered. She squeezed her eyes shut until the nausea passed. “I have to get back to my place. All my stuff is there.”

“All your stuff is downstairs, Brianna. I checked you out of that awful motel last night. I won't have you staying there any longer. It's not safe.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him he wasn't the boss of her, but then she remembered that's exactly who he was. Her boss. And she'd been lying half naked in bed beside him, and she'd kissed him last night and watched him sleep this morning and... She covered her face with her hands as tears welled in her eyes. She had no home, no way to pay the extra expenses from her hospital visit last night, no hope.

Trent quietly inquired, "Is your head still hurting this morning?"

Brianna raised her head and attempted to nod, only to stop on a pained groan. "Yes."

Trent climbed out of bed then returned moments later to hand her two pills and a glass of water. "Here, the doctor prescribed these painkillers last night."

"Thanks." She pushed up a little straighter in bed and took both of the pills, the water helping to ease the dryness in her throat. After draining the glass, she handed it back to him with a smile. "And thank you for picking me up at the hospital last night. I really appreciate it." She snuggled back down beneath the covers and watched him through her lashes. "I'll get out of your way just as soon as I find a decent place to live. I've been meaning to get a new place anyway, now that I've got some extra money from filling in for Pam."

"Take your time, Brianna. Recover first, then worry about everything else. There's plenty of room for you here and you can stay as long as you need." She gave him a dubious look and he grinned. "Seriously. I'm not here much anyway, so it'll help to have someone keeping an eye on the place."

His statement caused an ache in her chest. He obviously wasn't home because he was out with one of his many women, but she still appreciated his offer, even if she'd never take it. It wouldn't be right, staying in her boss's home. She watched him, sitting on his half of the enormous bed, looking all rumpled and sexy and thoroughly delicious. Yet another reason not to stay. Too dangerous around here.

Her eyes grew heavy and soon, she drifted off to sleep again.

When Brianna woke several hours later, she was alone in the luxurious bedroom with the curtains drawn to keep out the sunlight. This time when she tried to get up, the nausea was gone. Relieved, she pulled the sheet around her and walked to the nearby window to glance outside. Trent's backyard was unlike anything she had ever seen, except on TV or in magazines. A brilliantly blue pool occupied one side of the space, complete with a pool house. An extended tennis court filled the other side.

Entering the bathroom, she used the facilities then washed her hands and examined the array of sprays and lotions on the countertop, obviously put out for a guest's use. Among the expensive bottles she located a bottle of men's cologne and held it to her nose for a sniff. It was the same scent that she'd noticed on Trent earlier in the week. The sound of a clearing throat interrupted her reveries and had her whipping around to face the door—and then grabbing onto the vanity while her equilibrium caught up with her.

Trent leaned against the doorjamb, dressed now in jeans and a sweatshirt. "I came to check on you."

Brianna put the bottle on the counter, feeling like a little kid caught with her hand in the candy jar. "You startled me."

"You look like you're feeling better."

"I am, thanks. I was looking for my clothes?"

"I gave them to my housekeeper. I'm afraid your skirt was beyond repair and your shirt will most likely be permanently stained from the cut on your head."

Brianna sighed. Great. Not only had she incurred even more medical bills with last night's events, but she was also down one serviceable outfit.

"Listen, why don't I have my housekeeper fix you something to eat? By the time you're done, your clothes should be clean." He pushed away from the door. "Sound good?"

The smells of freshly brewed coffee and fried pork drifted up from somewhere on the floor below and her stomach rumbled. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had anything

besides peanut butter sandwiches to eat. “Okay.” She glanced down at the sheet still wrapped round her. “Any chance you might have a robe or something I could borrow?”

“Check the back of the door.” Trent winked then headed downstairs. “I’ll let the housekeeper know you’re ready,” he called as he descended the stairs.

Brianna closed the door behind him and found a thick white terry cloth robe hanging over a brass hook just as he’d said. As she wrapped it around herself, she briefly wondered what had happened to her bristly boss from days earlier, but she quickly pushed the thought aside. He was being nice to her in her time of need, and that was enough. By the time she brushed her teeth, washed her face, then walked back into the bedroom, Trent had returned with her breakfast tray. The delicate veggie omelet with bacon on the side smelled fabulous, and the glass of orange juice and perfectly toasted bagel accompanying looked heavenly. With a mumbled thanks, she sank into her chair and dug into the food like the starved person she was.

Trent sat across from Brianna while she devoured her food and took a more thorough inventory of his houseguest. She was underweight, still had those dark circles beneath her eyes despite her twelve hours of sleep, and seemed totally unaware of the effect she had on him. While she ate, he attempted to convince her to stay with him. “You can’t go back to that motel, Brianna. It’s awful. And you need some new clothes too. I’d be happy to have George from Godfrey’s send over some things in your size for you to try on later, if you’d like. As I said before, this house is yours, until you decide you don’t want to stay anymore.”

She stopped mid-chew and looked at him. “I appreciate all your help last night, but you’ve already done more than enough. I don’t want to put you through anymore inconvenience on my behalf.”

Inconvenience? Just the mere thought of her and what had happened in the back of his car last night had his pulse racing and his body hardening. This whole situation had passed “inconvenient” a long time ago. He stared across the table at her and tried a different tactic. “Janet said your emergency contact was a nursing home. I spoke with them this morning, and they asked me to convey their well wishes for a speedy recovery and to let you know that your mother is fine and will be very happy to see you when you are feeling a little better.”

Brianna’s full lips pressed into a thin white line at his words. From the look in her eyes, she was pissed, but she didn’t say a

word. Just stared at her plate and pushed the last few bites of her food around with her fork.

Trent wanted to beg her to stay, wanted to shake her for being so stubborn, wanted to pull her off her seat and into his lap and kiss her silly. Instead, he clasped his hands and put on his best game face, the one he used during negotiations with his toughest clients. He couldn't let her leave, not without somewhere safe to stay and new clothes on her back. "Brianna, you'll stay here until you've healed and you've found another place to live, one that's safe."

Tears gathered in her eyes once more, and he forced himself to stay firm, no matter how badly his chest ached. This was for her own good, whether she acknowledged that or not.

Her voice caught, and she sniffled. "You don't understand. It takes everything I make just to pay for my mom's care, and what I had left over barely covered the cost of that motel."

Oh, hell. He pushed from his chair and gathered her in his arms before he was even conscious of his actions. He pressed his lips to the crown of her head and whispered, "Don't cry."

"Quit telling me what to do," she grumbled.

Trent smiled. There was that backbone she'd been missing. "Then stop crying." He stroked his fingers through her silky hair, still avoiding her bandages. "It won't help anyway."

"How would you know? Besides, it makes me feel better."

Trent laughed and scrunched his nose. "Really? It doesn't look like you feel better right now."

She pushed away from him and he let her go, crouching in front of her now with her hands in his. "Brianna, listen. It's obvious you need assistance from someone right now. I want to be that person. Please let me help you."

Brianna shook her head, "Trent, you're my boss. It's not right."

"Who says?" He could be her friend *and* her boss. Maybe even more, eventually. As far as he knew there was no law against it. "C'mon. What are you afraid of?"

Not since Serena had Trent considered having a woman be more than a bed partner. Thoughts of Serena had his mind wandering to the meeting that was currently taking place at Caldwell Enterprises. He had cautioned security to be on the lookout for Marco Bresi, just in case the man was so bold as to show up during the negotiations and try to cause problems.

Brianna didn't answer, just stared down at him with endearing uncertainty.

He pulled her from the chair and down onto the floor beside him, then wrapped her in his arms and lightly kissed over the bandage at her temple. Running his hands up her sides, he stopped at the deep vee down the front of her robe. He raised his gaze to hers and saw the flare of heat in her eyes and also the spark of fear, the same fear he felt whenever they touched. The fear that once they started, they would never, ever want to stop.

"Brianna?" he asked, her name nothing more than a rough growl.

"Yes," she whispered, her tone pleading for his touch, for more.

With one finger, he slipped inside her robe and traced the shape of her hardened nipple. Then he pulled her closer to possess her mouth, taking the kiss deeper as she gave in to his demand for entry. His other hand slowly unknotted the belt at her waist and pulled the robe apart so his hand made contact with her warm flesh.

Molding first one breast and then the other, he felt her tentatively raise her hands to circle his neck as her body softened and swayed closer to him. Running his free hand up and down her back, he felt her shiver in reaction and let his mouth roam from her lips to beneath her ear.

Brianna tipped her head back, giving him greater access while she barely contained her moan of pleasure. Her hands played in the hair that curled at the nape of his neck and tugged at his collar, and he shivered beneath her brazen touch. She pulled his sweatshirt over his head, tossing it somewhere behind them,

then let her hands wander his back and around to his chest, molding the muscles, and flicking his taut nipples.

Trent felt ready to explode, his body responding to her like a green teenager again. If he let her continue to play with him, this would all be over soon, and he wanted this to last. He took back control and laid her down on the plush carpet, freeing her of the robe then worshiping her with his eyes, daring her to cover herself as she blushed.

“You are so beautiful,” he told her as he stretched out beside her. Not giving her a chance to stop him, his hands and his mouth began their own form of worship as he showed her exactly how beautiful she was. Before long, Brianna was panting and he smiled when he saw she did indeed blush in other places, as her low moan turned into a wail when pleasure overtook her and she came undone under his hands.

Not stopping, Trent continued to explore her body. She opened her eyes and met his gaze. The desire he saw there took his breath away. He’d never had a woman look at him the way Brianna did.

He wanted to go slowly, but the longing to bury himself deep inside her, making them one, was too much. Rolling her beneath him, he made room for himself between her legs. He closed his eyes in pure pleasure when he realized how wet she was, how very ready for him. Moving slowly, he pressed his erection to her entrance and carefully pushed inside her, wary about hurting her in any way. Her moaned response was pure music, and he groaned when he was fully embedded in her warmth, holding still to enjoy the feel of her wrapped around him.

Brianna shifted impatiently beneath him, begging for more, and he thrust in and out as she clutched wildly at his shoulders. It took all of his self-control not to slam into her; the urgency was so great that he fought to breathe. He shuddered as her inner muscles embraced him with each thrust, making it difficult to maintain a steady pace as her body spasmed around him.

A deep flush crept down her body as she trembled in his arms. Increasing his pace Trent dipped his head and captured her scream of pleasure with his mouth, as his own orgasm shook him to his very core.

Brianna tried to get control of her emotions as well as her breathing while beside her, Trent's breathing slowed into the patterns of sleep. After several minutes, the air chilled and Brianna felt self-conscious and reached for the robe at her side. Pulling it across her body, she was alarmed to feel the wetness between her thighs. Then it hit her, they hadn't used any protection!

Sitting up, she quickly slipped the robe on and belted it then glanced at Trent to find him still snoozing away, as if he was completely unconcerned by what they had just done. She quickly calculated the probability in her head and couldn't contain her moan of despair. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Trent stirred and smiled up at her and she almost burst into tears again. Pushing to her feet, she rushed toward the bathroom.

Trent followed and caught her by the wrist. "Brianna, wait. Where are you going?"

"I need a shower," she mumbled before pulling free from him and heading into the bathroom. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a moment before turning on the water and letting it heat. She couldn't get pregnant. Not now. Not with everything else going on. Distracted, she dropped the robe and climbed into the walk-in shower without bothering to lock the door.

Beneath the pounding spray she pulled the ruined bandage off her head then leaned against the travertine tile wall and allowed her emotions to release. Sobbing, she pressed her heated face to the cool stone.

Behind her, she registered the sound of the heavy glass door sliding open again, then the feel of a warm, strong chest pressed to her back as Trent's arms came around her waist. "Brianna, honey, I'm sorry. Please tell me what's wrong. Did I hurt you?"

"No." She hiccupped and turned to press her face against him. "I—I'm s-sorry."

He cupped her cheeks and pushed her damp hair from her face. "Honey, what do you have to be sorry for?"

"I—I don't k-know," she sobbed. "I—I just a-am."

"C'mere." He held her at arms' length and poured a dollop of shower gel onto a washcloth. "Let's get you cleaned up and then we'll talk, okay?"

"O-okay." As he gently rubbed the cloth over her skin, he seemed to work away her anxieties. And when he filled the palm of his hand with shampoo, and washed her hair for her, Brianna thought she'd die of ecstasy. She couldn't remember the last time someone had treated her so gently, like she was precious.

He smiled at her groan of appreciation then turned off the water and helped her out of the shower. Trent wrapped a towel around his waist then dried her off with a plush towel before combing the tangles from her long hair. After she was clean and dry and felt pampered to within an inch of her life, he carried her back to the bedroom and placed her carefully in the bed before stripping off his towel and joining her. With his body heat beside her and his arms holding her close, she slid into sleep again.



When Brianna next woke, it was to find her robe lying at the foot of the bed with a handwritten note inviting her to join Trent downstairs once she awoke. After using the bathroom to freshen up, she donned the robe and headed downstairs.

She took in her surroundings and wondered what it would be like to live in such luxury every day. She would never want to leave her house. Finding Trent sitting on a couch, aimlessly flipping through the TV channels, she took a seat on the opposite side of the couch, dreading the coming conversation.

She had given it some thought, and if she somehow became pregnant from today's activities, she would just have to figure out how to handle it. She wouldn't expect anything from him; after all, she had seen how he treated Chelsea when she had tried to get him to spend more time with her. He had sent his assistant to buy her an expensive bauble and then forgotten about her.

Trent smiled as she approached. "How's the head?"

"It's fine. Not hurting all that much right now."

"You can have more pain medicine whenever you need it."

Brianna nodded. "Great. Um...I was wondering if you could call me a taxi."

"Was there someplace you wanted to go? I'd be happy to take you wherever it is."

Brianna considered the ramifications of letting him drive her to see her mother and decided she really didn't have many other options. Her available cash for cab fare was severely limited. And besides, it wasn't like her mom's whereabouts were a secret anymore anyway. "Okay. I really need to go see my mom."

He nodded and stood. "Sure. Let me have the housekeeper bring up whatever clothes of yours are ready and while you get dressed, I'll pull the car around. Will that work?"

"Um, yeah. That will work just fine."

Brianna hid her surprise at his easy acceptance of her wishes. She had only known Trent Caldwell for a week, but he didn't

do anything unless it benefited him. All the way across town to her mother's nursing home, she tried to figure out how this trip was of benefit to him. She was still wondering that when they arrived at the facility.

The nursing staff informed Brianna they had not told her mother of her accident, not wanting to upset her. Trent had shooed her away to go visit her mother while he was given a tour of the facility by the night nurse who was clearly attracted to him.

Brianna's mother seemed happy to see her, and even though she had trouble communicating, she noticed her daughter's injuries. Brianna explained to her mother what had happened, assuring her again that she was fine now.

As her mother tired, Brianna went in search of the facility administrator. After the intimacy she had shared with Trent, there was no way she could continue working with him, nor would he appreciate having to see her every day. There was a small chance Janet could help her find another position within the company, but Brianna felt she owed it to the facility administrator to discuss her options in the event she was unable to meet her mother's fees. Then, of course, she worried about finding a place to live. Maybe Jack still had her old room available at the motel.

As Brianna rounded the corner, she saw Trent shaking hands with the administrator and wondered how the man was able to charm everyone around him so easily. The facility administrator had never smiled at her, let alone shaken her hand. Rather, she always felt slightly dirty after dealing with him, and more often than not, his gaze was fixed on her chest rather than her face.

She neared the men, and Trent turned, holding out his arm to her to indicate he wanted her by his side. Brianna ignored his gesture and instead walked toward the administrator, inquiring if he had a few minutes to discuss her mother's care. When he brushed her off and asked her to contact his office about scheduling an appointment, Brianna couldn't believe it. She watched in shock as the man turned and disappeared around the corner.

Trent took her by the arm and turned her to face him. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything? Nothing? Life? Pick one.”

“Is there something wrong with your mother’s care you needed to discuss with Mr. Abrams? I’m sure he’d be happy to meet with you if I went and got him.”

“Don’t bother. It won’t make any difference anyhow.” Looking up at Trent, she said, “I’m going to go spend some more time with my mom. Thanks for dropping me off. I’ll come by tomorrow and get my things if it’s okay to leave them there tonight?”

“What are you talking about?” Trent pulled her into the nearest vacant room.

“Well, um, you took my things to your house last night. You said you...”

“I brought you to visit your mother, and when you’re done, I’ll take you home. With me.”

“Trent, I appreciate all you did for me yesterday at the hospital, and this morning...but I need to find another place to stay, and to figure out a way to cover my medical bills from last night and the costs of keeping my mother here—and don’t worry about work, I’ll speak with Janet on Monday, maybe she can find...”

“Brianna, stop.” He cupped her cheeks and placed a finger over her lips. “We already discussed this. You’re returning to my house, where you will reside until you find suitable living accommodations. If there is a problem with the care your mother is receiving, you just have to tell me, and I’ll take care of it. And as far as speaking with Janet on Monday, that won’t happen. We’re both taking Monday off, to recover from last night’s attack.”

“Now wait a—”

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “I have arranged for an agent to show you some available properties on Monday morning, and I assure you they will not be located in Federal Heights.”

“No. I’ll find my own place to stay. I—”

“Brianna, no. If you think for one minute I’m going to let you stay in that motel another second, you don’t know me at all.”

“You’re right—I don’t know you at all. And you don’t know me either. We’ve worked together exactly one week. This whole situation is ridiculous.”

He frowned. “Listen, I know that what happened between us this morning was sudden, but what I felt, what we felt, was hardly ridiculous. It was special, Brianna. And I want to get to know you better, outside of work. Now, unless there’s something more you need to handle here, I suggest we say goodbye to your mother and head home. You must be hungry by now.”

Brianna was speechless. She was so unused to anyone lifting a finger to assist her, she wasn’t quite sure how to handle it. A part of her wanted to rebel at what felt like his high handedness, but at the same time, she was so relieved to have his support that she was ready to fall into his arms and forget about the last twenty-four hours.

T rue to his word, Trent had his realtor show Brianna several apartments over the next few weeks. All of them were within her budget and met his requirement for being safe. Brianna finally settled on one, which was a sublet and came completely furnished. The paperwork was quickly taken care of, and she was able to retrieve her belongings from his house and move in the same night.

Trent had spent their time together taking Brianna to dinner, the zoo, and movies, in the hopes of showing her that he was serious about their relationship. Several times a week, he worked late into the evening, and on those nights, he would call her on his drive home, and she would drift off to sleep with the sound of his voice echoing in her ears. Trent wasn't sure which of them needed it more.

On other nights, they would end up back at his house and together they would explore their attraction to each other—in bed and out of it. Brianna seemed pleased with the pace of their romance and direction they were going, and Trent realized that he'd never felt this way about any of the other women he'd dated. Not even Serena.

Working together had proved less of a disaster than she'd predicted, although she confessed to him that there were times when she relished the thought of tearing him apart, piece by piece. Apparently, this was one of those days.

Trent served on the board of directors for several charity foundations and one of the biggest fundraisers of the year was

taking place tonight. He was required to attend and give a short speech, and he'd decided Brianna should accompany him as his date. The problem was that it was black tie, and even though Janet had gone shopping with her, Brianna didn't have the resources to purchase a formal gown. She'd returned to his office empty handed and now sat at her desk, her expression gloomy.

So, he'd taken it upon himself to pick out her gown for the evening. Excited, he handed her the garment bag and watched as she unzipped it. Inside was a lovely sapphire blue evening gown, matching shoes, and the appropriate undergarments. He'd also arranged for a beautician to arrive in thirty minutes to do her hair and makeup. Most women he knew would've been thrilled. Brianna? Not so much, if her scowl was any indication.

"I thought you'd like it," he said, using his best coaxing tone. "It goes so well with the lovely shade of your eyes."

"Stop it." She sat down behind her desk again and pulled up the latest projections she'd been proofreading on her computer.

"At least wait until you try everything on and then decide, okay?"

She gave him a disgruntled look. "Fine. But I'm not happy about it."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't just walk in and take over my life, Trent."

An hour later, after her hair and makeup had been professionally styled and she'd tried on the dress, he emerged from his office dressed in his tux with a velvet jewelry box in his hand. He took her hand and kissed it. "You look stunning, honey."

"Thank you." She blushed, and it took everything he had not to pounce on her right then in his office. He took a deep breath to get himself under control, then draped her wrap around her shoulders and lead her to the elevators. He waited until they were in the backseat of the Bentley to give her the necklace.

Brianna gasped as she stared at the sapphire and diamond pendant. “Trent, it’s gorgeous.”

“Turn around.” He secured the thin white gold chain around her neck then kissed her neck at the sensitive spot where her throat met her shoulder. She shivered against him and he smiled, saying a small prayer for strength to get him through this night. The moment he had seen the dress he’d envisioned her wearing it. When he had seen the matching undergarments, all he could think about was helping her out of them. He rapped on the privacy screen and called to the driver, “Let’s go.”

Brianna snuggled into his side and smiled up at him. For the first time in several weeks, he felt the weight of responsibility lift and true happiness fill his soul, due in no small part to the amazing woman at his side. A woman he was rapidly coming to realize that he didn’t want to live without.

There’s been a certain glow about her over the past few days and if he didn’t know better, he’d think she was pregnant. He’d seen that look before on his friends’ wives and had always envied them. Part of him even wished that Brianna might be carrying his child.

Then he thought about it some more and figured it was unlikely. After that first time, they’d used protection religiously. Still, one time was enough. When she’d first come upstairs to work directly for him, he’d been curious and a bit concerned about her since she always looked so pale and seemed to eat very little, but since they’d been together as a couple, he was pleased to see that she ate well and slept well now. Perhaps that was the reason for her healthy glow. Still, he couldn’t fight the small hope that she might indeed be pregnant.

Even if it wasn’t true now, one day when she did become pregnant with his child, he had every intention of doing right by her. He was a Caldwell, after all.

Brianna was thankful Trent took her to eat at some of the upscale restaurants before thrusting her in the middle of the muckety-muck Denver social scene. Everywhere she looked, she saw beautifully dressed people, sipping champagne and eating small appetizers she couldn't begin to pronounce.

Trent had kept her by his side for most of the evening, introducing her freely to everyone he spoke with, and Brianna felt included and—surprisingly—loved.

As it drew near the time for Trent to give his speech, Brianna stood next to a tall column, slowly sipping a glass of ginger ale. She had never been much of a drinker and found the taste of most alcoholic beverages downright disgusting. Trent had laughed and promised to corrupt her. She'd responded by telling him he was welcome to try and that she looked forward to seeing how he reacted to failure.

Thinking about that repartee put a smile on her face, which was still there when the handsome older gentleman stopped next to her. "Signorina, may I say you look absolutely stunning this evening."

Brianna smiled at the good-looking man. "Thank you." Her confidence in her appearance had grown, and with Trent's insistence, she had begun to see herself as he saw her.

"So, what brings you to this meeting of the rich and famous?" the man inquired.

“I’m here with Mr. Caldwell.” Brianna frowned as a look of pure hatred flitted over the man’s features before it disappeared in a flash. “And you are?”

“Marco Diamante.” He stooped to kiss the back of her hand, his dark gaze locked with hers. “At your service.”

Brianna couldn’t suppress the sudden shudder that ran through her and resisted the urge to snatch her hand away from him.

“Shame on him for leaving such a beautiful lady unattended,” Marco said. “May I get you another drink?”

Brianna still couldn’t find Trent amidst the crowd of people, but turned her attention back to her companion, “Oh, no, I’m fine. Thank you. You have a very unique accent.”

“I’m originally from Italy. I’ve come over to the States to conduct some business and meet with some investors. So, what does a stunning woman like you do with her time?”

“I’m Mr. Caldwell’s executive assistant.”

“I see. And what business is Mr. Caldwell in? Maybe I should make his acquaintance?”

Brianna nodded her head, “I’d be happy to introduce you. Trent’s the CEO of Caldwell Enterprises. They buy struggling businesses and work to turn them around and make them profitable.”

“I would love an introduction. Tell me, is it a normal custom in your country for executive assistants to attend social functions with their employers?”

Heat stormed Brianna’s cheeks. “Sometimes. Depending on the event. In our case, Trent and I are also dating, and…”

“Oh, I see. Well, he is a very lucky man.”

Brianna searched for Trent again, uncomfortable in this man’s presence though she couldn’t exactly say why. Finally, she spied her date heading her way, with a furious look on his face.



Trent had been searching for Brianna for several minutes when he spied her leaning up against a pillar at the back of the large room. Smiling, he wondered how she was enjoying her first foray into the high society of Denver. Personally, he was bored and ready to leave.

As he headed in her direction, he saw who her companion was, and his blood ran cold. Marco Bresì.

He made a direct path toward them, ignoring the well-wisher who greeted him along the way, his focus completely on Brianna. Whatever Marco had up his sleeve, Brianna didn't deserve to be caught in the middle.

As he reached the pair, Brianna watched him with uncertainty and Trent tried to reassure her that he was not angry with her. "Marco. What are you doing here?"

His nemesis released Brianna's hand, and Trent pulled her against his body to shield her from Marco's touch. "Good evening, Trent. You have a lovely young woman here."

"What do you want?"

"What do any of us want?" Marco gave a negligent wave. "Happiness? To see our children grow up and become successful? Grandchildren to bounce upon our knees?"

Trent did his best to keep his expression stoic. He knew Marco still blamed him for Serena's death and the loss of his grandchild. "That's quite a list. Good luck."

"Luck has nothing to do with it. I understand you completed the Global Tech acquisition. Congratulations."

"Say whatever it is you came here to say then go."

"Don't order me about. Unlike Serena, I will not be commanded easily. You owe me and I *will* collect. Count on it." Marco glared at Trent then turned to Brianna with a smile. "My dear, you really should keep better company. I would hate to see you become another casualty. Good evening."

Trent watched him saunter away, heading for the door. It was clear that he'd only come here for one thing: to make his presence known. Trent worried that Marco had now set his sights on Brianna. He felt her shift beside him.

“Trent, that man told me his name was Diamante.”

“Diamante is his middle name. His full name is Marco Diamante Bresi.” She gave him a confused look and he sighed. “I promise I’ll explain later. Let me get this speech out of the way first, then I’ll take you home, okay?”

Brianna relaxed and smiled. “Go give your speech. I’m tired of playing dress up tonight.”

Trent gave her a lingering kiss then made sure she was safely tucked away next to the stage where he could see her the entire time.

After giving his speech, Trent took Brianna home and carefully explained his relationship with Serena, telling her about surprising her in Milan only to find her in the arms of her lover, her demand for help when she found out she was pregnant by the other man, and then her suicide and the damning note she’d left. Brianna listened sympathetically and expressed sadness over the senseless loss of life and Marco’s inability to move forward.

Trent was grateful for her understanding. He also wanted to apologize for his behavior earlier and decided to do it the best way he knew how. Of course, it helped he was deeply interested in personally taking her dress off so he could see her in her undergarments.

Hand in hand, they walked upstairs. Or at least, that was the intent. But three steps up, Brianna kicked off her shoes. Two more steps and she turned to face him. Reaching out, she pulled his tie loose and undid his shirt buttons. Exposing his chest, she leaned in and kissed him, tracing his muscles as they rippled beneath her lips.

Another step up, and Trent kicked off his shoes and pulled the pins from her hair. Thinking that she was going to kiss him again, he was surprised when she lifted her skirt and ran the

rest of the way up, laughing. Smiling, he easily vaulted the steps after her.

Striding into the bedroom, he found her standing in front of the bed with her back to him. The overhead lights made her hair sparkle like precious metals. Turning, she lifted her hair, “Help a girl with her zipper?”

“Of course.” His mouth dried as he stepped forward. Drawing the zipper down, he watched as the dress pooled around her feet like shimmering water. She stepped out of it then faced him, the pale blue lace bra and matching panties looking fantastic against her skin.

She pulled his shirt from his trousers as he removed his cufflinks, then she tugged his shirt off of him completely. Brianna rubbed her hands across his chest and he closed his eyes, enjoying the sensuous feel of her touch against his skin. Her fingers trailed down to his abdomen and she traced the line of his waistband before reaching for the clasp on his trousers. Her hands fumbled and he helped her slid the zipper down.

He quickly stepped out of his pants. He never bothered with underwear, and he’d never been so grateful for that choice as now when her feather-light touch on the inside of his thighs awoke feelings he never knew he could experience.

When he first saw her with Bresi, he’d been overcome with feelings of rage that the man would dare insinuate himself with her, but that had quickly been followed by fear. Fear over the threats Bresi had made over the years. Fear over his inability to move on. Fear for the woman who, in such a short amount of time, had become incredibly important to him.

But now they were home, safe. And he needed to wipe Marco Bresi from both of their minds.

Bending, he scooped her up and tossed her into the middle of the bed then joined her, kissing her as his hands explored her body. Trent sucked on her lower lip and slid his tongue in her mouth before breaking the kiss to follow his hands across her body, kissing and licking her everywhere.

Reaching behind her, he released the clasp on her bra, tugging it off and tossing it over the side of the bed. Brianna lifted her arms over her head, arching her back up in invitation. He laved her nipples, feeling her shiver beneath him as she moaned his name. The noises she made when they made love were better than any symphony, and he keyed in to the shifts as he drew her pleasure out.

At last, he shifted between her legs and reached for the waistband on her panties, pulling them down her legs and discarding them off the side of the bed in the general direction of her bra. Now there was nothing between them, and she was more than ready for him. Grabbing a packet off the nightstand, he tore the wrapper off, sliding the condom over his waiting hardness then lifted her hips, and drove into her, gasping as her muscles eagerly welcomed him. Thrusting deep, he buried himself to the hilt and she arched against him meeting his thrusts with her own.

Picking up the pace, each stroke became more chaotic as her muscles clung to him with each outward pull. Brianna grabbed onto his shoulders, pulling him toward her as she wrapped her arms around him. He could feel her nails lightly scoring his back. With a cry, Brianna came, her body twitching and spasming beneath his as she held tightly to him. One, two, three more thrusts, and his own orgasm rolled through him, leaving them both spent.

For Brianna, the next week flew by. Trent was gone for three weeks to Frankfurt to finalize the acquisition of Global Tech, and they managed to talk before she went to bed most nights. It was always very early in the morning for Trent, but he'd told her that hearing from her each morning got him through the day.

During his absence, Pam returned, and Brianna found herself moved into a different assistant position working under Janet.

She was happy in HR, and as Janet's assistant, her salary had remained the same. Janet had quickly become a friend and since they both seemed to care for Trent, she felt she finally had someone she could talk to about life.

Two days into her new position, Janet called her into her office. When she came in, she was surprised when Janet asked her to shut the door. Brianna had a brief flashback to the first time she'd been called into HR, when she was sure she was about to be fired, but she quickly squashed that fear down.

Sitting in one of the chairs across from her boss and friend, she waited while Janet finished tapping a few keys. Finally looking up, Janet clasped her hands.

Unable to wait any longer, Brianna blurted out, "What is it?" She was worried that something had happened to Trent.

"How well do you know Pete Newman?"

The question caught her by surprise since she hadn't seen or heard from Pete since the day she'd moved upstairs to work

for Trent.

“When I first started here, he was nice to me—very welcoming. But then he started asking me out daily. Sometimes *multiple* times a day. I didn’t appreciate the pressure. I’d only been here for a couple weeks and with my mom so sick, it was all too much. So I started—” Brianna paused.

“Started?”

Taking a deep breath, “I started dressing down. I still tried to make sure that I was dressed appropriately for the office, but I intentionally dressed as plainly as possible so as not to encourage him. Not to encourage anyone. It was easier and I also didn’t have to think about what I was going to wear each day because I was going for...serviceable.”

Janet sat back and steepled her fingers as she stared at her.

“What? Janet, what is it?” Janet reached for a file on her desk and silently handed it over to Brianna who took it gingerly from her. Taking a deep breath, she opened it to find copies of some emails Pete had sent to a couple guys in the marketing department. The messages described sexual activities he’d supposedly had with her in nauseating detail and also speculated on her relationship with Trent. Brianna dropped the file on the desk. “None of this ever happened. We were never together. I wouldn’t even met him for drinks. Why would he lie like this?”

Janet reached across the desk to retrieve the file. “Someone else happened to see one of these emails and filed a complaint with me, so I had Sys Admin pull all of his correspondence.”

Clapping her hand over her mouth, Brianna thought she was going to be sick. “I didn’t do any of that, Janet.”

“I believe you. Of course, even if you had, it would have been no one’s business but yours. The only one at fault here is Pete. Nothing in those emails is appropriate workplace communication.”

“Oh! Does Trent know?” While Brianna was furious with Pete for spreading lies, she knew Trent would hit the roof over the

idea of someone disrespecting her that way. She didn't want Trent to get into trouble for attacking Pete—which he would almost surely do.

“Not yet. Here's what I need you to do.” Opening a drawer, Janet pulled out another file and handed a form to Brianna. “I need you to fill this out and include everything you told me along with anything else you can think of about any of your interactions with Pete that felt inappropriate or made you uncomfortable. The emails Pete sent are in violation of our employee conduct policies and he has been suspended without pay pending my investigation. If there's also a pattern of sexual harassment, then that's important information for me to know.”

Brianna looked through the form and tried to focus on what she needed to do next, but her mind was reeling. “What about the other guys? The ones in marketing he sent those messages to? Are they—”

“Both are currently under investigation, but they're still working pending a review of their use of company property. Brianna, I don't want you to worry about this. From what I've already been able to determine, there have been other incidents over the years. Now, I want you to go fill that out and then take the rest of the day off. You are not at fault here. Understand?”

Nodding her head, Brianna stumbled out of Janet's office not sure whether she should be upset or furious with Pete. Clearly, his ego couldn't handle the brush off she'd been giving him by rejecting his advances, but she was shocked that he would take it to this level. Filling out the form, she signed and dated it and then dropped it on Janet's desk before heading out for the day. She really wanted to clear her head and decided to go visit her mom.

When she got into the office the next day, she found out that all three of the guys had been let go. Breathing a sigh of relief, she decided that the best thing she could do was keep her head down and work.

Except Marco Bresi had begun contacting her at work, trying to lure her away from Caldwell Enterprises by offering her a job as his personal assistant in his Rome office. The salary he offered was staggering, but Brianna had no interest in working for him; especially after Janet had shared some of his underhanded attempts to impact Trent's contract negotiations.

Each time he contacted her, Marco had invited her to lunch, and she had finally relented, meeting him at the deli in the lower part of the building, thinking she might be able to help him see the truth about his daughter's tragic death. Unfortunately, he was firmly convinced Trent had lied to her. After that, he only increased his attempts at luring her away from her current employment.

After several days of being bombarded with his phone calls and messages, she finally told him she didn't think Trent would approve of her speaking with him and asked him not to contact her again. She was pleasantly surprised when he complied.

Things were going very smoothly until she woke up one morning and rushed for the bathroom. After losing everything in her stomach, she had felt better and headed off to work. Unfortunately, the nausea had remained with her most of the day and she finally told Janet she needed to go home.

Brianna continued to be sick, usually in the early mornings then again in the evenings. After the third day, she began to get concerned she had some terrible disease.

She was exhausted and her conversations with Trent had been shortened with her often begging off because she didn't feel well. Trent offered to come home immediately, but she put him off. He was so close to wrapping things up; she didn't want to be the cause for the contract negotiations to fall through.

Brianna heard the knock on the door and cringed at the idea of having to move. The nausea had been worse than ever today, and she found if she stayed still on the couch, she could make it almost an hour without rushing for the bathroom.

Having to move got her stomach churning again, and she barely released the latch when the urge to vomit overwhelmed her, and she rushed for the bathroom again.

“Trent called me in a panic. You need to see a doctor,” Janet said once she found her leaning over the toilet.

Brianna was never so happy to see anyone in her life. “I don’t know what I’ve got, but you shouldn’t come too close. I can’t keep from throwing up and it’s getting worse.”

“Don’t worry about me. Come on, let’s see if I can find you something you can hold down.”

The next day, Brianna sat in an exam room of the physician Janet had called for her, flabbergasted.

“What?” Brianna couldn’t have heard the doctor correctly. They had been so careful, all except the first time and that was more than three months ago. She’d had her period since then—or at least, she’d spotted a little each month. There was no way she could be pregnant.

“I ran the test myself, Miss Daughtry. You are pregnant. It isn’t uncommon for women to spot especially during the early stages of their pregnancy.”

A baby? She was going to have a baby?

“I’m giving you a prescription for vitamins and an anti-nausea medication to help with the morning sickness. I advise you to contact an obstetrician and set up an appointment for regular checkups. Congratulations.” The kind doctor handed her the prescriptions then left her to get dressed.

She was pregnant!

Janet waited for her when she came out several minutes later. “So, are you going to live?”

Brianna attempted a smile, but then promptly burst into tears. Janet wrapped an arm around her shoulders and asked for an explanation.

“I’m...I’m pregnant.”

Janet's expression morphed from shock to elation. "That's wonderful! I can't wait until you tell Trent. He's going to be thrilled."

Brianna stopped crying and shook her head frantically, "No. You can't tell Trent. He has that big business deal in Germany, then he's supposed to go to Amsterdam to look at another facility before he comes home. He's already concerned about me. If you tell him, he'll leave right away and it will be my fault if things with either deal fall through. Promise me you won't tell him."

"Brianna, be reasonable. Trent would want to know, especially since you've been so sick. You have to tell him."

"No, I can tell him when he gets back and things aren't so crazy. Maybe by then, the morning sickness won't be so bad, and..."

"Brianna, listen to me. I've known Trent for most of my life and believe me, you don't want to keep this from him. Tell him now."

Janet tried to convince her to tell Trent, but she refused to burden him with it while he was overseas. Instead, Brianna called him and made up a lame story about having the flu. Her heart ached at the lie, but at least he seemed to buy it.

The negotiations overseas went smoothly and Trent returned to the States three weeks later to find an exhausted looking Brianna working at her desk in HR. He'd been so concerned about her. She kept declining his offers to return home early, telling him she was fine. His attempts to get more information from Janet had been fruitless, so he'd grudgingly listened to her, but looking at her now?

The fact she was still not recovered from her flu had him concerned. A simple flu virus shouldn't take this long to disappear. She had dark circles under her eyes, and from what Trent could see of her gaunt face, she'd lost weight. Again.

Janet spied him first and gave him a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Trent immediately knew that something wasn't quite right.

Reaching Brianna's work area, he wrapped his arms around her from behind and nuzzled her ear. "Miss me, honey?"

Brianna turned and wrapped her arms tight around him, burying her face in his chest. Her thin shoulders shook, and he realized she was crying.

Alarmed he pulled back slightly and lifted her chin with his fingers. "What is it, honey? Please tell me what's wrong so I can make it better." His heart broke at the sadness in her eyes. Had something happened while he was gone? Was it her mother?

He picked her up and made a beeline for the elevator. After reaching the top floor, he sent Pam home early, wanting some

privacy with Brianna.

He sat down on the couch in his office and kept her in his lap. “Brianna, tell me what’s wrong.”

She pushed off his lap and walked to the far side of the room, refusing to look at him. For the first time, real fear set in. Was she leaving him? Had she found someone else? Was she dying? What? He longed to rush over and demand that she tell him, but forced himself to stay put. That was the old Trent. The pre-Brianna Trent.

“Trent, look at me.” Brianna finally turned to face him. “Really look.”

His gaze ran over her from head to toe. From the top of her long coppery hair, down over her gaunt face and neck, over her breasts which seemed to be a bit larger than he’d remembered, straining now against the buttons of the new blouse he’d bought her a few months ago. Lower still, he noticed though she seemed to have lost weight elsewhere, her waistline had increased slightly and there was a slight bulge to her abdomen that hadn’t been there when he’d departed, and...

The realization dawned slowly and with the powerhouse effect of a nuclear bomb. Trent looked at her eyes, his own wide. “Are you...?”

“About four months.”

He looked at her stomach again and did the calculations in his head. That meant it had to have happened the first time they were together. He frowned, digesting the news. He was going to be a father. Him. Trent Caldwell. Dad.

“Well, say something. Please?” Brianna’s tone sounded nervous.

Trent looked into her eyes and saw both doubt and love. A slow smile spread across his face. “I was just thinking about the first time I met you. You were wearing a shirt that was so snug, you popped a button. And looking at you standing here, with your shirt in close to the same state, I have to admit that I prefer the reason why now.”

Tilting her head, Brianna looked at him. “So does this mean you...”

He didn’t let her finish. He pushed to his feet and rushed to her side, kissing her soundly. Then, reverently, he placed his hand on her stomach, while kissing her again as if she held the last bit of oxygen on earth.

He picked her up once more and returned to the sofa with her in his arms. “Promise me you’ll never keep something this important from me again.”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she buried her face against his shoulder and nodded her head.

Sitting back, he tilted her head up forcing her to look at him. “I’m serious, Brianna. I was so worried about you.”

She gave him a tearful smile. “I didn’t know what was going on at first, and once I realized, I didn’t want to worry or distract you. These negotiations are important to Caldwell Enterprises. To you. I didn’t want to be the reason they fell through.”

Cupping the side of her face, Trent kissed her. “Let’s get something straight right now. *You* are important to me. If you had needed me here, I could have turned the discussions over to someone else and come straight back.” He looked at the shimmer of tears in her eyes. “I mean it, Brianna. You are more important to me, do you understand?”

Throwing her arms tightly around his neck, Brianna burst into tears, shocking Trent. He hugged her tightly, rubbing her back and internally panicking over having no idea how to calm her down. Her tears reminded him when he’d seen her in the hospital after that attack, looking so small and alone. All he’d wanted to do was console her and be the person who made her smile.

He could hear her mumbling against his neck, but he couldn’t make out what she was saying. Trent tried to pull her away so he could hear her, but she held on tighter and seemed to cry harder.

“Brianna, honey? What is it? What’s the matter?” She continued to mumble against his skin. “Honey, I don’t understand what you’re saying. Would you please tell me?”

Lifting her head, she sniffled, and he reached up to wipe some of her tears away, causing her to give him a soft smile. “That’s better. Now won’t you please repeat what you said?”

Her chin trembled and she finally blurted out, “I love you,” and then thumped her face back against his shoulder.

Smiling against her hair, he stroked her back, hoping to calm her down. When her arms loosened slightly, he kissed the side of her head before softly calling her name. “Brianna. I love you, too. I’m sorry I haven’t said it before now. Now, about that promise I need from you...”

Trent insisted they get married immediately so the baby would have his name, and so Brianna wouldn't have any more excuses for not moving in with him.

He hired a wedding planner who must have been seeing dollar signs with all the lavish suggestions she was making. With each new binder she presented to Brianna, filled with examples of other high-profile weddings, Brianna became more and more uncomfortable. She wasn't interested in having the wedding of the year. She didn't have any family other than her mother, and aside from some distant cousins and aunts and uncles that he hadn't spoken to in years, the majority of people who would be attending from Trent's side were business associates.

Brianna had been excited at the prospect of her mother being present at her wedding even if she wouldn't be able to walk her down the aisle, but the wedding planner seemed to be doing everything in her power to keep that from happening. Brianna had tried to hide her feelings about it all from Trent, but he'd noticed immediately that something was wrong. When she told him, he'd fired the wedding planner instantly.

Instead, Trent suggested they have an exclusive outdoor wedding at the house, which would allow her mother to not only attend, but participate—and Brianna had fallen a bit more in love with her future husband.

She was so happy, she readily agreed to everything Trent suggested. She even cut back her work hours and accepted the

personal driver he hired for her. He also moved her mother into a room in his house, complete with a team of private nurses to provide round-the-clock care. Brianna had once again cried at his generosity, something she seemed to do a lot of lately.

News of their pending marriage made national headlines, and when she received the strange bouquet at work, she really didn't think anything of it. It was an arrangement of calla lilies and miniature red roses, and the card had an inscription in a foreign language.

Brianna showed it to Trent that afternoon when he came to walk her out.

“How long have you been making nice with Marco Bresi?”

“What?” Brianna hadn't realized that the card had been written in Italian. The flower arrangement apparently was significant as well. From what Trent told her, he had sent a similar arrangement to Serena's funeral.

Brianna had immediately thrown the beautiful flowers in the trash. She didn't understand Marco's obsession with revenge, and Trent admitted he didn't understand it, either. Serena had been dead for almost three years. Brianna felt sorry for Marco and hoped somehow he would find peace and accept his daughter's death for what it was.

As their wedding day drew closer, Brianna became increasingly worried about Marco. Would he try to disrupt things? He'd been silent other than the flowers. Trent had done his best to alleviate her concerns, but she could sense his own worries.

On the day of their wedding, the weather was gorgeous out, and Brianna was excited as she got dressed for her nuptials. Both Janet and her mother were with her, although Janet seemed to be doing all the talking.

“You look amazing Bri,” Janet said as she helped adjust her dress. “Don't you agree, Angela?”

Her mom nodded her head. Talking had been difficult for her ever since the stroke, but she did her best to get the words out

when they really mattered. “You...look...nice, baby.”

“Thank you. Thank you both. I feel nervous but so happy, too. Can I be both?”

The other women both nodded before Janet replied, “Totally normal. I remember my own wedding day. I was a bundle of nerves.” Taking her hands, Janet squeezed them lightly. “But you’ll do great. I’ve never seen Trent so in love with, well, anyone. That man would bring you the moon if he could.”

Brianna laughed before giving Janet a kiss on the cheek. “I’d settle for him being a little less protective.”

“Yea, that’s not an option. He’s a Caldwell.”

They could hear the string quartet begin to play in the garden. There was a knock at the door, and Janet got up. “Well, that’s our cue. I’ll bring your mom out while you finish getting ready.”

A few minutes later, Brianna joined her mom at the entrance to the garden and leaned down to kiss her, whispering, “I’m so glad you’re going to join me down the aisle.” One of Trent’s groomsmen stood behind her mom’s wheelchair. When the music began, she took her mom’s hand and together they made their way toward her future.



As the time drew nearer for Brianna to give birth, she quit working altogether and found satisfaction in volunteering with some of the local charities. The Children’s Hospital became the primary focus of her attention, and she attended numerous fundraisers, with and without Trent by her side.

With proper therapy, her mother had regained some use of her left side and was able to speak more easily. Everything seemed to be going well, for once.

Brianna even became a cover model, of sorts. As part of a campaign being promoted by the hospital, she’d agreed to a photo shoot in their home, focused on the nursery and childproofing a playroom. She was featured on the cover of

5280, a local Denver magazine, and received numerous messages and well wishes for a quick delivery and healthy baby.

The week before her due date, she visited Janet at the office and was stunned when reception put through a call to her from Marco Bresi.

“Brianna, how nice to hear your voice. I was under the impression you had quit working in light of your delicate condition.”

“I have, which has me wondering how you knew to call me here.”

“Oh, it was purely luck, signora. I was planning to leave a message and was pleasantly surprised when the receptionist said she would put me through to you.”

Brianna didn’t believe him for a second. “Was there something you needed?”

“I’ve been meaning to call and ask if you received my flower arrangement. The one I had sent over to congratulate you on your marriage. I realize it’s been a few months, but time flies when one is conducting business worldwide.”

Brianna wasn’t sure what game he was playing but found she didn’t like being in the middle. “I did receive your flowers and promptly threw them in the trash. Did you think Trent wouldn’t realize they were the same types of flowers he sent to your daughter’s funeral?”

“Good. I was hoping he would see the significance. He took my daughter and grandchild from me, and I’m never going to let him forget that.” The hatred in his voice was unmistakable.

“I refuse to discuss that any further. Trent had nothing to do with your daughter’s death. I’m sorry for your loss, but I really would like you to leave us alone. Leave *me* alone.” Brianna didn’t wait for a reply but quickly hung up.

“Are you okay?” Trent asked from the doorway behind her.

Brianna nodded, “How did you know who I was talking to?”

“Janet called me. She was concerned he would upset you, and with you so close to delivering... I don’t like that he persists in contacting you.” Trent had tried to get a restraining order against Marco, but given that the majority of the calls had come from overseas, and since he’d yet to make any threatening comments or gestures, they were powerless to do anything.

Brianna pushed herself up from the chair and placed a hand on her aching back. She had been having Braxton-Hicks contractions all morning, and now her back hurt something fierce. Rubbing one hand on her lower spine, she gave Trent a smile, “I think I’m ready to go home.”

“Good. So am I.” Trent helped her out of the building, gave quick instructions to their driver, then climbed into the back of the Bentley beside her. Trent kissed her cheek and patted her round tummy. “Ready, Momma?”

“Ready, Daddy.”

When they arrived at the hospital, Brianna smiled at him, clearly not surprised that her husband had known she was in labor. She'd told him many times before that he always seemed to be one-step ahead of the rest. Now, Trent guessed he was.

Her doctor was waiting for them upon their arrival, and they were brought back to a private room until she was ready to deliver. After far too many hours of the labor not progressing, the doctor had encouraged a C-section and Brianna, already exhausted, had agreed. Almost twenty-four hours after arriving at the hospital, Trent looked through the nursery window at a healthy baby girl neatly wrapped in pink, complete with a matching hat. He snapped a few pictures of their daughter who had come in at a healthy eight pounds and six ounces.

While he waited for Brianna to be taken back to her room, he stared at the tiny, perfect human they'd created. How was that even possible? Looking at this little bundle, the degree of responsibility and protectiveness he felt weighed heavily on him, and he had a moment of panic contemplating the responsibilities that awaited him.

What schools would she go to? Would she have trouble making friends? Much to Brianna's amusement, he'd already researched and bought the best toys for an infant, and he had a list of age-appropriate toys already lined up to ship to the house as she got older. His wife had laughed at his preparations, telling him he needed to relax, but this was too important to risk getting anything wrong.

Walking down the hallway, he looked again at the pics he'd taken of their daughter on his phone. Brianna had gotten a quick glimpse of her right after the delivery, but neither of them had been able to hold her yet. As soon as she was settled, the nurses had promised to bring their daughter down to the room. Trent couldn't wait to see his wife holding their baby for the first time.

Entering her room, he was happy to see her looking relaxed and pain free. "Hey, Momma, how're you doing?"

Brianna gave him a tired smile, "Good. Can I see her? Is she okay?"

Trent leaned down and kissed her. "She's perfect, just like you. The nurses are going to bring her down in a few minutes."

"I can't wait to see her."

"Me, either." Trent pulled his phone from his pocket, "I took a few pictures of her a minute ago—look."

He handed his phone over and marveled at the look of pure love on her face. There was nothing more beautiful than a mother looking at her child.

Several more minutes passed, and the nurse still didn't arrive with their daughter. Trent got impatient. He pushed the call button and a nurse entered.

"Hi. Darcy, is it?" Trent read the nurse's name from her tag, "I was wondering if you could check on our daughter. I was told they would bring her down."

Darcy smiled. "Of course. Let me go check on that for you. I'll be right back."

Trent sat down in the chair next to the bed and began researching preschools while Brianna rested. He became intent as he read reviews of schools, grumbling at some of the parental complaints.

"What are you doing?" He looked up to see his wife smiling at him. "Let me guess. Prep schools? No, wait. You're researching whether learning a musical instrument or a second language is better for children."

“That’s a thing?” Tapping the search bar he started to enter the query when a red light began flashing over the clock on the wall. The door opened and a different nurse walked in without the baby. Pocketing his phone, he stood up as the woman walked toward them. Something was wrong.

“Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell, my name is Stephanie Belkins, and I’m the charge nurse for the newborn nursery.” The nurse was wringing her hands. “I just have to say that in the fifteen years I’ve been here, there has never been a baby abducted from this hospital. Ever.”

“Trent!” Brianna cried out.

Rushing to his wife’s side, he grabbed her hand turning to look at the nurse. “What exactly are you saying? Where is our daughter?”

“According to her chart, she was to have been brought up to you, and we’d assumed that was what happened. But as of now, her whereabouts are unknown.”

Brianna began to cry and Trent glared at the nurse. “How could something like this happen?”

“We aren’t sure. I’ve notified security, and the hospital has been locked down. Everyone will be checked before being allowed to leave. We’re hoping that it’s just a matter of the baby being—”

“Misplaced?” Trent demanded. He couldn’t keep the fury out of his voice. “Are you suggesting that you might have *misplaced* our newborn daughter?” Next to him, Brianna was sobbing, and he sat on the bed and wrapped his arm around her.

The nurse held up her hands. “Now Mr. Caldwell, while I’m hoping that’s not the case, it would be better than the alternative.”

There was a knock on the door. A security guard entered and whispered something to the nurse who nodded at him. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment,” she said. “The police have been notified and someone will be in to speak with you shortly.”

Before Trent could stop her, she hustled out of the room, leaving them alone.

“Oh Trent! Why would someone take our baby?” Brianna cried and Trent held her tightly trying to relax his body to help keep her calm but he couldn’t. His body was tight with tension and fear. Was this a kidnapping for ransom? It wasn’t as if anyone knew they were coming here since his wife’s delivery date was still a week away. Was the choice random and their daughter was just unlucky? Who would do this?

EPILOGUE

Something wasn't right. Seth Jacobsen paused in the hospital lobby, his pulse kicking up and the hair standing up on the backs of his arms. Ten years in the military, the last six as a SEAL before he'd gotten out, had taught him to listen carefully to his inner radar, and right now it was going crazy.

Two security guards hovered near the glass entrance, two more stood by the elevators, and two more lurked near the front desk, all of them nervous, fidgeting, and talking way too much into their handheld radios. Seth glanced over his shoulder. Police cars were pulling up, and folks were moving a little too fast around the lobby. He gave a nod to the guy who'd dragged him into this "very quick stop" on the way to go grab a couple of beers. "Okay, what do you think is going on?"

Shawn didn't answer. He was scanning the room, looking tense enough to break if someone pinged him. Aside from being his best friend, Shawn Marshall had partnered up with Seth in opening a security firm. If Shawn was looking worried—and he definitely was, with his forehead bunched tight and his mouth pulled down—there was something to worry over.

Nodding to the front desk, Seth tapped Shawn's arm. "Let's find out what's going on before we head upstairs to see Trent's new pride and joy."

Seth kept his movements easy and a smile in place. The security guards didn't have guns, but he'd seen Tasers clipped onto their belts. He had no wish for some shock therapy. The hospital was like any other—bright, sterile, and not very

pleasant to visit. He nodded to the nurse at the front desk—she stared at him as if he was interrupting. “We’re here to see the Caldwells—they just had a new—”

He cut off his words when the security guard on his left stepped up. Seth didn’t like the palpable aura of menace going on in a guy who had a couple inches and at least fifty pounds on him. He pulled his PI license from his pocket and flashed it. “Trouble? This better not involve the Caldwells.”

The security guard tensed even more. The guy looked like he’d maybe been a linebacker at one point in his life, and he had an air about him as if he still liked tackling things a little too much. The nurse at the front desk blurted out, “We have a missing infant.”

Shawn pushed out a hard breath and a curse under his breath, and Seth asked, “Whose?”

The guard shook his head. “Don’t know yet. We’re on lockdown. I’ve been instructed to keep all media out of the hospital, no matter what.”

“Okay, we’re not media, and we’re coming in.” He turned his back on the man. Nothing pissed off security like being ignored, but coddling the guy’s feelings wasn’t high on Seth’s agenda right now. Not with his gut tightened, warning him that something was seriously wrong. He told Shawn, “Call Trent’s cell.”

“We’re going to see him in just a few minutes,” Shawn argued, but the words lacked conviction, especially when he still looked so tense. He pulled out his phone, frowning as he checked it. “No signal.”

It was Seth’s turn to curse. He glanced at the nurse and gave her a smile—the one that usually worked in bars. “Okay if we go up?”

She swapped a look with the unhappy security guard, but she nodded. They signed in, got visitor badges, headed to the elevators and rode up to the fourth floor. Neither of them spoke.

Seth liked Trent and Brianna—he didn't want the baby that was taken to have been theirs. He couldn't imagine how anyone could deal with that. Even thinking about it left his stomach tight and his jaw tense. Then again, maybe he was jumping the gun. Maybe there had just been a miscommunication and the baby had accidentally been taken to the wrong place. He suspected that was why the guards were out, and his money was on a search being made of the whole hospital.

The elevator pinged, the doors opened and Seth followed Shawn out, and right into a flurry of activity. Security personnel were on the move—yeah, that looked like a search pattern to him—and he could hear a woman crying, her sobs low and shaky.

Seth headed toward the center of the activity. A stern-looking nurse with short, blonde hair and a name tag that read Stephanie Belkins stopped them. “Can I help you?”

That sounded like code for “get the hell out.” Seth tried to win her over with his best smile. “We're looking for the Caldwells.”

Nurse Ratchet eased back on the bristling, swallowed and looked back toward the room where that woman was crying. “Now is not a good time for visitors. I'll take your names and let them know you stopped by.”

Shawn shook his head and pushed past the nurse. She looked ready to grab him, but Seth put a hand out. “Ma'am, we're friends. I assume their newborn is the one missing?”

She swung around on him, eyes narrowing. “I'm not allowed to say.”

“That pretty much says it. Look, my partner and I run a security firm—I hope that our services won't be needed, that this is just a mix up, but I need to find what's going on. As in, *now*. So, excuse me.” Seth headed to the room Shawn had just entered.

Braced for the crying, Seth hung back. He hated crying women. Thankfully, Trent seemed to have the matter in hand.

He was seated on the edge of a hospital bed, one arm around the shoulders of his sobbing wife. He also looked like he'd love to take a swipe at whoever had taken their baby, even if it was a nurse who'd put the baby in the wrong crib. Seth couldn't blame him.

Brianna looked exhausted—shadows under her eyes, hair lank, skin pale. Seth knew she'd needed a C-section, but it was supposed to have been easy. Routine. Now the situation was looking like a nightmare.

Hanging back, Seth leaned one shoulder against a wall. He'd let Shawn handle this. For now.

Hands stuffed into his jean pockets, Shawn headed over to Trent's side. "Hey, man—what happened?"

Trent glanced up, and Seth winced. The guy looked more than angry—fear haunted his eyes, and Seth knew why. A newborn was not just your average baby. It was a tiny, delicate thing that needed constant care.

Shaking his head, Trent answered, his voice hollow. "It...you know we'd planned on a normal delivery—but the doc didn't like how it was going. We decided on the C-section, and it all went fine. Fine. Brianna was brought back here after surgery, and I stopped by the nursery to look at the baby through the window." Fumbling with his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone. "I took photos of her. Look...she's perfect. The nurses promised to bring her to Brianna—she hasn't even been able to hold her daughter."

His voice broke. Shawn took the phone and handed it to Seth. Working fast, Seth sent the photos to his own phone. To him, a baby was a baby. Red face, pudgy, not much hair, not much to identify it. How did anyone tell them apart? He knew they put wrist bands on the babies, but anyone who would take a kid would cut that off pretty fast.

Voice low and calm, Shawn asked, "Does the hospital think that maybe she's in the wrong bed—or was taken to the wrong mother?"

Trent's throat worked. "God...I wish. Someone came in. Said there's security video of someone slipping into the newborn ward. That's all they would say—someone. Why don't they know who?"

Seth pushed off the wall. Security footage—that was something he could work with. "Let me see what I can get."

He headed out and found Nurse Ratchet again. He flashed her his credentials and gave her a business card. "Any chance you can sweet-talk security into letting me see the footage from the newborn ward?"

She gave him a flat stare, looked at his card, and back up to his face. She had blue eyes but right now they were rimmed with red. She stared at him long enough that he thought she was going to tell him just where he could get off. Instead, she gave a nod. "Come on." She led the way down corridors, into elevators and down more halls. They all smelled like disinfectant to Seth. They were all beige and big. He'd never liked hospitals—they'd always looked depressing to him and right now, it was so much worse than normal.

Swiping her badge, Nurse Stephanie—he couldn't keep thinking of her as Ratchet if she was doing him a favor—led him into a room with a lot of camera feeds displayed on monitors. She talked to the security guy, her voice low. Seth got a look, then the security guy gave a nod. He typed in something and pulled up a feed. "That's what we've got."

Seth leaned in close. A figure in a hat and long coat slipped in right after a nurse had hurried out. Whoever it was stopped, bent, and checked the names on each crib. At one point, whoever it was—man or woman—reached in and picked up a baby, swaddling it in its blanket. The kidnapper never looked at the cameras. Seth pointed to the screen. "There...that frame. Can you freeze it and zoom in on the hands?"

"How's this?"

Squinting at the image, Seth nodded. "Yea, that will do. Can you give me a print out?"

“It won’t be pretty,” the security guard warned him. As he had said, the printed image was grainy, but it would have to do. He didn’t have a face, but hands were visible—they looked narrow, long. Maybe a woman’s?

“Any chance you have this person on video in other parts of the hospital? Maybe there’s a chance we can get a look at his or her face.”

The security guard shook his head. “Not so far. At least not with that hat and coat on.”

“Okay. The Caldwells would appreciate it if you would keep looking. Anything that might be suspicious could help us out.” The guard nodded in agreement and went back to scanning footage.

Seth followed Nurse Stephanie back up to Trent and Brianna. Outside Brianna’s room, he stopped. “Do you think the baby will be okay? She looked pretty small.”

The nurse fixed a look on him. “That baby needs to be with her momma. The sooner, the better.” She turned and walked away.

Seth nodded and headed inside. Trent rose from the bedside, moving as slow as an old man. “They gave Brianna a sedative. She didn’t want it, but I don’t want her ripping her stitches. She’s on bed rest.”

Seth nodded to the hall and walked out of the room. He heard Shawn’s quiet steps and the slap of Trent’s shoes behind him. In the corridor, he turned to the other men and handed the photo to Trent. “That’s who took your kid. Any ideas who would go looking for your baby? Because this wasn’t a random swipe—whoever came here checked out every name before specifically picking up your baby.”

Frowning, Trent shook his head. “I...I’m not sure.”

Seth wasn’t surprised by that answer. Trent was still in shock and not thinking straight. That would wear off soon. He swapped a look with Shawn, and Shawn started into the usual speech they told anyone who’d had a family member taken. They’d worked a couple of high-profile kidnappings—they

were never fun. The trick was to keep your cool, find out what the kidnapers wanted, and then make your own plans.

“Trent, I know this is hard, but I need you to focus for a minute. You’re now our client—we’ll work everything else out later. Time is important. You’re going to have police here soon. Talk to them, be honest, and keep it together. You get a call, a note, anything asking for ransom, you let us know.”

As they were talking, a volunteer came toward them, pushing a cart filled with brightly colored flowers, balloons, and stuffed animals. Given the number of somber faces on the floor, it seemed completely out of place. The woman stopped outside the door and picked up a vase filled with miniature red roses and some sort of lily from the cart and started to walk into Brianna’s room.

Head coming up, Trent stared at the vase. “Stop!” His hands began to shake. “Who are those from?”

Seth looked at the fear in Trent’s eyes and stepped forward to look for the card—but there wasn’t one. Turning to the woman, he asked, “Is the card missing?” The volunteer started to shake her head but then stopped, looking uncomfortable. Seth narrowed his eyes. “What is it?”

“It’s just that...the order came in by phone. No name, but the caller requested a sympathy card. We thought that was weird, since this is the maternity ward. The flowers were so pretty, the gift shop manager thought it best not to include the card. So, do you still want them?”

Shawn took the flowers from the woman and began inspecting them as Seth turned back to Trent who was visibly white and shaking now. Leaning heavily against the wall, he looked like he was going to cry.

“Trent, talk to us, do you know who these flowers are from?”

“They’re a message. From Marco Bresi. He’s kidnapped our baby!”

Seth’s eyebrows climbed up again. “Bresi? I’ve heard that name before. How do you know him—or how is it he knows you?”

Trent pushed a hand into his hair. “I...I dated his daughter, but she was...it just wasn’t working. We split up. She...poor kid killed herself. Bresi blamed me. I wouldn’t put it past him to take my baby—take her to Italy. If he does that—”

“Slow down. One thing at a time. Who else might want money from you—or payback?”

Shaking his head, Trent frowned. “I don’t know. There’s just Bresi. I sent these same flowers to his daughter’s funeral, and Bresi sent them to Brianna when we announced our wedding. It must be him!”

“Okay. It’s someplace to start.” Right now they didn’t have much else to go on. Police might turn up fingerprints—he’d look into that later. He turned to Shawn. “I’ll start running leads and see where it gets us. You hang with Trent. He needs to be with Brianna, and I’ve got a feeling things will be smoother here with you around.” He put a little extra emphasis in the words. He didn’t need Trent running off after some guy and making a mess of things. What if Bresi wasn’t to blame and the flowers were sent to the wrong room? Trent didn’t need a lawsuit for throwing around accusations. But it would be good all the same to cross Bresi’s name off a list that was right now both too long—since lots of folks might want Caldwell money—and too short.

Besides, Trent was a good guy, and this wasn’t a job for good guys.

Shawn nodded. “Got it. You need to talk, call the hospital and they’ll connect you to Brianna’s room.”

Seth started to leave but then turned back and put a hand on Trent’s shoulder. “Doesn’t matter what it takes, we’re going to find your baby and bring her back to you. Now, before I go, what else can you tell me about Bresi?”

END OF CEO'S PREGNANT LOVER

DENVER MEN BOOK ONE

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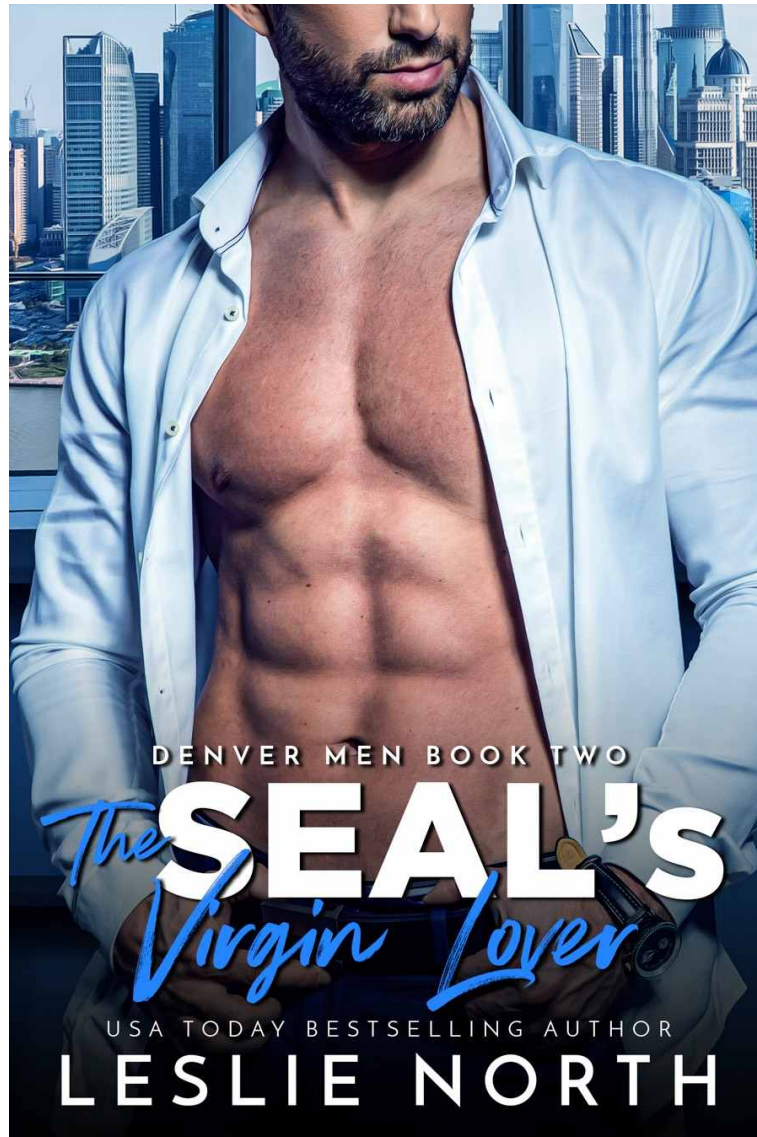
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BLURB

Danger and romance make for an unforgettable meet cute...

Former Navy SEAL Seth Jacobsen has been hired to find the kidnapped infant of billionaire Trent Caldwell. Tracking down the baby is easy. Getting the little one away from the sassy and beautiful nurse looking after her? Not so much. Seth doesn't understand how she can be so warm and affectionate one moment, and so cold the next. But he can't deny, there's something about her he just can't resist...

Chelsea Andrews refuses to back down. A mysterious stranger hired her to look after a baby, and nobody is going to get in the way of her doing her job. As far as she's concerned, men like Seth are one thing... Trouble. And despite their growing

attraction, she isn't about to give her virginity away to just anyone—even if he is tall, muscular, and *unbearably* handsome.

When they're forced to work together to return the kidnapped infant, Chelsea realizes there's more to this gruff alpha male than meets the eye. Could he be the man she's been waiting for?

This book was previously released in 2014

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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Seth Jacobsen stepped out of the Caldwell's hospital room and made a beeline for the nearest exit to catch his breath. He didn't like hospitals on a good day, and generally, he did his absolute best to avoid them at all costs. He ended up in some sort of healing garden according to the sign; although he wasn't entirely sure how much healing could go on with all the flashing lights from the police cruisers visible from the windows. Since no one was around, he began to pace so he could think better.

Kidnappings were incredibly emotional for the families involved, but when the missing person was a baby, a newborn, the stakes were that much higher and the emotions were that much stronger. It didn't help that he was friends with the parents. Both of them looked like they'd been turned inside out. Even with the sedatives, Brianna struggled to rest, and he couldn't imagine the level of shock and grief she was experiencing. Seth knew her husband, Trent, was going through the same thing, but he looked more murderous than anything else, which was why Seth's partner in his security

firm, Shawn, was still upstairs with them, preventing Trent from charging out after whoever had taken the baby.

While kidnappings were more prevalent overseas, they did still happen in the United States, and given Trent Caldwell's net worth, it wouldn't surprise Seth if there was a ransom demand already on its way.

But then, if Trent was right and Marco Bresì had orchestrated the kidnapping, then this wouldn't be about ransom. Bresì didn't need the money. What Seth didn't understand was what the man intended to do with a newborn—other than hurt Trent as much as possible. But given the vendetta between the two men, maybe that was reason enough.

He caught sight of news vans joining the police cars and contemplated returning to the office, but he still needed additional answers. Heading back to the security station, he knocked on the door, hoping it would be opened by the same guard he'd spoken to earlier. It was.

"Hi. Seth Jacobsen, we spoke about an hour ago? I was wondering if you'd found any other footage of the kidnapper."

The security guard blocked the door but looked over his shoulder. "The police are here. How about you let them do their job?"

Seth could do without the attitude and was about to say something to that effect when he heard a male voice call out, "Is that Jacobsen? Let him in!" The guard reluctantly stepped aside, and Seth looked to see who had spoken.

"Corbin? Good to see Denver PD has put their best on the job." Seth stepped through the door to shake the hand of the detective. "How are you?"

"Divorced. What brings MJI out here? Did the Caldwells call you already?"

"Actually, Shawn and I are personal friends of the Caldwells. We came to offer our congratulations after the delivery, but we arrived to discover we'd gotten here shortly after the incident. Of course, we immediately offered to help. Has there been any other sighting of the perp?"

“Marshall is here, too?”

Seth nodded his head. “He’s upstairs with the parents. And you’re ducking my question.”

Corbin laughed. “I guess I am. And the answer is no. We’ve checked all the footage, and we’re assuming there was a wardrobe change.”

Stepping closer to the monitors, Seth looked down to watch as a uniform went through the surveillance file. The security camera’s video was grainy and even with his limited knowledge of video editing, he didn’t think any of it could be cleaned up for better identification. “Any footage of someone leaving with an infant?”

As he said it, there was static over a radio that he couldn’t make out, and Corbin pointed to a set of monitors where the video appeared to be showing a blank wall. A moment later, the camera angle changed, and they were looking at a close up of one of the security guards as he adjusted the camera’s position.

“Cameras in the lower service halls were shifted, so my guess is the perp went out that way.”

“Where does that lead?”

“Service dock. Already checked it out. No one saw anything.”

Seth thanked the detective for his time. With what little he had to go on, he still wasn’t sure if there was going to be a call for ransom, but this was clearly a planned kidnapping. Now the big question was what the kidnapper had planned next.

Chapter Two

Chelsea Andrews looked up at Marco Bresi’s log...well, the word “cabin” didn’t do it justice, not when it had two floors, a balcony, a porch, and views that couldn’t be beat. The limousine had stopped in front of the place, and she knew she should get out, but she had to take a minute to gawk. A new Prius was also parked in front of the four car garage, and somewhere close by, she could hear the sound of water from either a fountain or a waterfall.

This had to be paradise.

For the last ten miles, the limo had been steadily climbing up winding roads. The city of Denver was already a mile high, but now she was among towering pines, rugged peaks, crisp air, and fall colors with aspens turning bright yellow against the darker green. She'd never known the Rockies were so beautiful. Pulling in a breath, she got out and swiped a damp palm down her jeans. The limo had driven between tall, stone gates and that should make her feel more secure, but this place seemed so...so isolated.

It was an odd situation.

Her new employer had come through a referral, not from her usual agency, but Chelsea hadn't been able to pass up the opportunity. Six-months, her normal fee doubled, and she would be expected to travel with her charge—a single child. Compared to helping look after her sister's eight-month-old twin boys, this would be a walk in the park. Rachel was almost back on her feet after Mark's death—or so she kept saying—and she had pushed Chelsea into taking the job, saying Chelsea needed a new challenge. “And I need to spend time with my boys on my own!”

Chelsea had smiled at that—her sister had always been the one pushing her, first to finish nursing school and now to get back out into the world after trying to help Rachel recover.

Her employer's instructions had been to pack only one suitcase—the driver was pulling that out of the trunk for her. The limo had picked her up at her apartment—she had sublet it for six months to another nurse who was going through a divorce. Chelsea assumed she'd be back in it once this job was over.

The sheer luxury wasn't something she was used to—and now she was staring this amazing structure in what was otherwise the middle of nowhere. Well, the middle of a forest, with a lot of winding roads. She'd been glad the limo had a stock of club soda to help settle her stomach—it wasn't helping much with her nerves. Meeting new employers was always tough, but Marco Bresi seemed like a man who went overboard on extra

security—her phone call with him had left him sounding a little paranoid with all the questions he'd asked.

“Miss Andrews?” Turning, she blinked and smiled at the driver. “Please head on inside. I'll bring in your luggage.”

She smiled and headed for the front door, startled when a man stepped out from the shadows to look her up and down. Dressed in a dark suit, he looked intimidating with his hand resting lightly on a rifle that sat in a shoulder sling. The door opened and an older gentleman said something to Mr. Dark and Scary in a different language before smiling at her. He looked about fifty—or maybe a really well-preserved sixty. Wavy hair was still thick but graying. His suit jacket—a casual sports coat in a pale gray—and his dark-gray trousers hid the extra weight of an older man very well. He had on an open-neck shirt that looked like silk in a pale yellow. An olive complexion and startlingly brown eyes spoke of a Mediterranean heritage, as did his slight accent.

“Miss Andrews?”

She stuck out her hand. “Chelsea, please.”

“Then you must call me Marco. Please do come in.”

Before stepping through the door, she looked to see where the other man was, but he'd already left the porch and was making his way toward the garage. *Definitely security conscious.*

Outside, she'd seen rough logs with a rustic, rugged look. That theme continued inside to an extreme. Polished hardwood floors that reflected the light, lots more wood on the walls in various shades of tan, Southwestern print rugs on the floors that looked like they were antiques. The décor—huge, leather chairs and sofas, a table that could seat at least fourteen, and animal heads with antlers hung up high—didn't quite go with the man in front of her. He looked too—well, too sophisticated for a place like this.

A huge stone fireplace dominated the room, the rock a gray slate, and from what she could see, the kitchen sported high-end stainless steel appliances that would impress any interior decorator. The almost floor-to-ceiling windows gave sweeping

views of the vista outside, and the height of the room stretched up to the peaked roof, with more warm planks. Pine, she thought.

Marco Bresi obviously had money to afford a place like this—either as a rental or as his home. She immediately stood up a little straighter and wished she'd worn a dress and sandals, not jeans and a white, cotton shirt.

“Come, sit. Would you care for refreshment? Wine? Iced tea?” He smiled. “I know you Americans love your cold tea. Or lemonade, perhaps?” He gestured to the leather chairs set in front of the rock fireplace.

She shook her head and sat in one of the chairs. It just about swallowed her up.

Marco poured himself a glass of red wine and sat opposite her. “You don't mind a few more questions? In person, as it were?”

She smiled—great, more interviewing. A movement from outside drew her attention. She glanced out to see two men in dark suits walking the back terrace—they almost looked as if they were on patrol. She glanced at Marco, eyebrows raised. “Are there more?”

“You needn't worry about my bodyguards. They are here to keep you safe.”

Chelsea shifted uneasy now. She didn't like that this man needed to have armed guards to feel secure. “So, there are two?”

“Si. Due. Two. They are very good at their job.” Marco waved a careless hand. “So much violence these days, and a man with treasures must protect them.” He smiled, but the expression didn't reach his eyes. “Sadly, I also have made enemies—there are terrible men in this world, and I must do what I can to safeguard against them. I have had...threats enough to make me cautious.”

She nodded—what could you say to that? But it worried her—what kind of man was he that he'd made the kind of enemies who would bring violence to him? She muttered something suitable about understanding his desire to be safe.

Marco's smile warmed slightly. "Your pardon, Chelsea, but... you look younger than your resume said."

She lifted one shoulder. "It's the curse of being blonde and small. Maybe when I hit fifty, I'll be glad I look ten years younger. But I'm twenty-six. I can assure you, I have excellent references."

Marco inclined his head. "Yes, I know. I called them. Three years working in the neonatal department, and then three more as a private nurse. Most impressive for one so young. You came highly recommended."

Chelsea kept her smile in place. She wasn't really certain how Marco had gotten her name—a mutual friend, he'd said. Now she wondered who had recommended her. But this wasn't the time for that. She'd taken the job, and she planned to stick with it.

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Owen

BLURB

A determined journalist and a sexy Navy SEAL team up to take down a drug lord...

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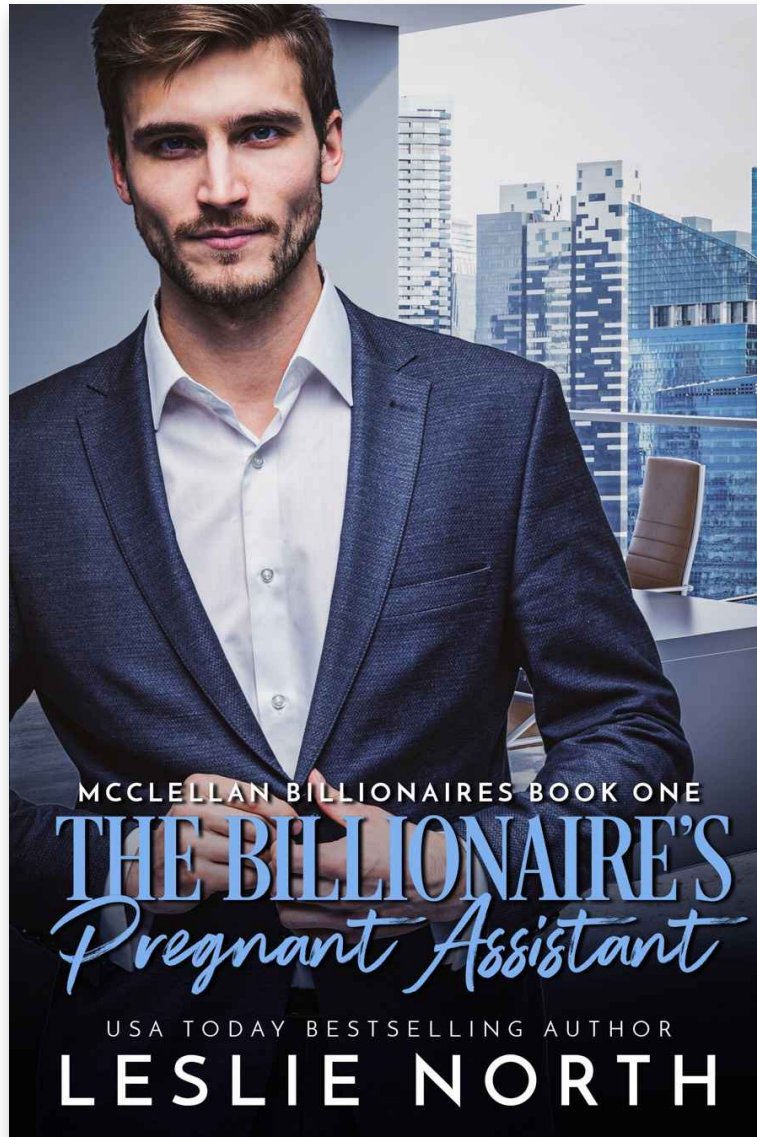
Owen's committed to keeping Sophie safe, even if the feisty reporter is a handful and a half. But the more time they spend together, the more he's forced to admit that Sophie is beautiful, brilliant, and oh so tempting... Pretending to be her husband is driving him crazy. Owen's been a player all his adult life. But Sophie's making him realize the only way he can win this game may be to keep her in his heart forever.

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BLURB

Billionaire Connor McClellan has a secret weapon: Rosalie Bridges. When he woos a potential client, Rosalie accompanies him as his “date”. But after their last meeting ended in a night of passion between the two, she isn’t returning his calls—and he needs her now more than ever to win a huge client.

Rosalie has been drawn to her outrageously sexy boss for years. But after they finally hooked up and he still wants to keep their relationship professional, she decided she was done being used. Of course, a positive pregnancy test does complicate matters.

With Connor desperately needing to land this deal, and Rosalie no longer willing to be a part of his fake relationship scheme, a deal of a different kind needs to be struck. If the two of them can pull this off, they may land the deal, and the love, to last them a lifetime.

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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Rosalie Bridges didn't consider herself a complainer. She prided herself on seeing the positive, finding the bright side, and seeking out the little moments that she could point to and say, "There. Right then I was really, really happy."

Some days though, she had to concede, that finding those moments was really hard.

Today, for example? Leaving the safety of her bed had become *really* hard to justify.

"Okay then, I'll go over it again from the top. Maybe I'm just not explaining it correctly?" Pasting a bright, winning smile on her face, Rosalie gripped her pen tightly to keep from throttling the unctuous restaurant manager who'd barged into her office without an appointment, only to demand she deal with him immediately. "We understand it's a clumsy workaround, but until the tech team installs a suitable patch in the system, it's the only way to keep this from happening again. Would you like to show me what's tripping you up?"

As outreach manager for the Aspen satellite office, Rosalie was used to fielding McClellan Systems' less sophisticated clients. The pace was slower and sleepier here than in the main New York office—during last year's visit, she hadn't been able to believe how fast everyone moved—which normally suited her fine. Only the people who primarily bought their systems

—the geriatric owners of family restaurants and passionate hippie-chefs with no common sense—often needed a patient, guiding hand.

And today, Rosalie was quickly running out of patience.

Taking a deep breath, Rosalie crossed and re-crossed her legs before smiling at the client across from her. “We’ll take as long as you need.” She shut the valve on her irritation. After all, it wasn’t the customer’s fault that her desk was sporting a sad lump of yellow carnations.

Carnations!

How had she been so wrong? When Connor had looked her in the eye and known her favorite flower, he’d convinced her this was it. After all these years of loving him from afar, he finally reciprocated all her admiration and desire. He *knew* her, well enough to know how much she valued the language of flowers. *Roses* meant passion.

Carnations?

Carnations—yellow carnations—meant ... *disappointment*.
Rejection.

As if the carnations hadn’t been insulting enough, the card hadn’t helped. Bland, boring, and printed—not even *handwritten*—on an insipid cardboard cut-out more suitable for a funeral arrangement.

Inside, all it said was “Thanks for all you do for McClellan Technology Group.” No name. No signature.

At first she’d thought it was a joke. She’d even stood at her doorway, waiting—for longer than she cared to admit—certain that the real, promised bouquet of roses would arrive soon after.

After all, she’d forgiven the flowers’ late delivery. Since their encounter at the lodge, she’d barely even been in the office until this week. For the past six weeks, she’d bounced from smoothing out their client relations with information-gathering visits to their businesses to attending a mandatory training in Denver before flying out to Singapore for a development workshop from which she was still jetlagged.

But she couldn't forgive this card.

All she *did*?

What she did was help him win over clients by pretending to be in love with him—no matter that she actually was. What she did was always remember his clients' names and add the right people to the company's Christmas card list? What she did was send a case of Vince Judson's favorite IPA, sealing Connor's most recent deal, even while in another freaking country.

What she did was make him look so good that he was in the running for Esquire's Man of the Year *again*. Was that all she did for McClellan Technology Group?

Or, was all she'd done was have sex with him in a moment of weakness she regretted more and more with every awful day that passed?

He hadn't even thanked her for all she did *for him*. Rosalie had always brushed off Connor's single-minded focus on business, but there was no brushing off how he'd thanked her for helping *his company*.

"This is completely unacceptable—" The client's voice rose, calling her attention back to him as he threatened to "—take this to someone higher." Rosalie jerked the leash on her runaway thoughts and sighed.

"You have every reason to be frustrated." Her words felt disloyal, but screw it. "The president of the company is aware of this issue." She glanced at the vase of carnations one more time before arriving at a decision. "Here's the number for his personal cell." She scribbled Connor's direct line on a scrap of paper. "You can call him any time, day or night."

Handing the piece of paper to the suddenly pleased client, she bid him farewell, feeling petty but triumphant. Connor wouldn't like being sold out like this. She was supposed to handle these issues so they *wouldn't* land in his lap. It was *what she did* for McClellan Technology Group.

She brushed her hands together, trying to hold on to the rush from petty revenge. But as soon as the client left, it faded,

leaving her alone in her office with the carnations again. For all the satisfaction knowing that the client was about to ruin Connor's day gave her, she was pissed that they had come to this.

They'd known about the weakness in the software for months now.

Connor had known.

She'd told him, multiple times, that they needed a suitable patch for this stumbling block, but had he listened to her?

Did he respect her as more than a prop girlfriend at all?

Rosalie curled her fingers tightly, digging her nails into her palm to keep her cool. *What the hell is going on with you?* It wasn't like her to react so strongly.

But this was Connor. Goddamn Connor McClellan. He made her feel like a million bucks every time she was at his side.

And an insignificant speck when he left.

Especially when he'd left her bed.

Her stomach clenched. Her usual breakfast of yogurt and granola wasn't sitting right. Absently rubbing her belly, she steadied herself against her desk as dizziness hit. "Whoa," she breathed. "Time for lunch."

She poked her head out of her office. "Are you over there?"

Rosalie's office assistant Anna poked up from behind the high-walled desk at the front of her office. "Geez, that took forever! I thought he was going to grab a cot and sleep here! Whoa, you look like hell!" Bubbly and blonde, she had a way of framing the most cutting insults as endearing.

Rosalie laughed, rubbing her stomach again. "I don't think I've fully shaken off that virus I picked up in Singapore."

She'd gotten back from the international intensive only a few days ago. Clearly she was still jetlagged and queasy from the unfamiliar but delicious food. It would explain her craziness, her general irritation, and low mood. She glanced over at her desk.

The carnations were a pretty good explanation too.

Anna caught the direction of her gaze. “They are pretty though.” She smiled brightly. “Want me to order in for lunch? Something carb- filled and delicious to settle your stomach?”

Rosalie massaged the throbbing place between her eyebrows. “Yeah,” she sighed. “That would be great, thanks a lot.” Retreating back to her office, she shut the door with a groan.

The lodge. The trip to Singapore where she’d represented McClellan well. All signs, she’d thought, pointing towards something more with Connor.

Until this.

With a grunt, she tore the sappy, impersonal card out of its holder and ripped it in two. “Thanks for all I do?” she hissed, shredding it into tiny pieces which drifted down to the garbage in irritating snow. “Sure, Connor. More like thanks for *nothing*.”



Connor set his phone back on his desk and stretched his hands over his head in silent triumph. He’d just hung up with Ed Coney of Ventura Enterprises.

The one who’d gotten away was *back*.

And this time, Connor would get his business.

He leaned forward to rest his elbows on the gleaming surface of his antique oak desk. His one concession to frivolity, it had been his grandfather’s, and though the sight of it drove his mother nuts, Connor had thought taking the token from the nasty old man after his death was appropriate.

Growing up, it had been just Connor and his mother. But he still thought grimly to this day, it shouldn’t have been. The fact that his mother had gotten pregnant, and then refused to marry the father was enough for Connor’s grandfather to cut her out of the will. Everything Connor had, he owed to his mom’s scrappy, ruthless drive to provide for them both. He’d built

this company as a monument to her. He'd amassed his first million just to prove that everything she'd done had been worth it.

But there'd been a tiny —okay bigger than tiny – part of him that wanted revenge. *See Pops? Look at what I accomplished. Bet you wish you'd treated Mom better now, huh?*

Taking his desk was petty. But Connor felt entitled to a little pettiness every so often, at least when it came to his mother's family.

He brushed his hand over the sleek surface of his grandfather's desk, only to lift his phone absentmindedly and check it again.

No calls. No texts. He glanced out the window. Not even a freaking carrier pigeon.

All day he'd waited for Rosalie's response. His secretary had been given explicit instructions. Four dozen yellow roses to be delivered right to Rosalie's desk at the Aspen office. "You're really good with words." He'd winked at Jenny. "Make sure there'd something nice on the card. Romantic. Meaningful. I'm no good with that stuff."

He flipped on his intercom with a grunt. "Jenny!" he barked. "Call the florist in Aspen! Make sure those flowers were delivered."

His secretary's tinny voice buzzed through the speaker. "Already done, Mr. McClellan," she chirped. "They confirmed delivery this morning. A woman named Anna Wilbur signed the receipt."

Connor nodded, grimacing. Anna was Rosalie's office assistant. He was pretty sure they were good friends too. No way the flowers had gone missing.

Which left only one other viable explanation.

Rosalie was ignoring him.

With a growl, he flipped off the switch. He did not need this right now. Rosalie should have responded immediately. Efficient, neat, and with a prompt reply, the way he liked to run his office. He expected his employees to follow the same

strict schedule. It was why his business ran so well. No one cut corners; no one slacked off.

And to win Ed Coney back to McClellan? He needed Rosalie in top condition.

Is that it? Is she sick?

He grabbed his suit jacket from the hook on his door. No, that wouldn't do. Not with the Coney business on the line. Word on the street was that the old man had found himself a new wife, one he doted on even more than the first. One of Connor's informants had even used the word "soulmates."

Connor had laughed. No one could be successful in both their business and personal life. Coney's second wife was no more than a trophy wife; he was sure of it.

Either way though, he would need Rosalie to nail this deal. If she was sick, the deal would be in jeopardy.

When Connor's door banged against the wall, Jenny jumped at her desk. "Call my pilot. I'm heading to Aspen a day early."

He'd bring Rosalie up to speed on the Ventura Enterprises proposal. If she was sick, he'd force-feed her ginger ale, vitamin C—whatever it would take. Nothing would come between him and this meeting.

Not even her inexplicable silence.

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