

Chapter 1

“YOUR BOSS MADE the paper again.”

Plop! The folded tabloid landed smack in the middle of Delilah St. Germain’s desk, sending papers flying. “Hey! I just organized those.”

She threw the two women standing in the doorway of her cubicle a good-natured glare. “Some of us have work to do.”

“Some of us would like to point out it’s seven-thirty in the morning,” Chloe Abrams replied. “We’re the only people in the office.”

Without waiting for an invitation, she and Larissa Boyd grabbed a pair of chairs from the empty cube across the aisle and sat down. “Besides, we brought coffee.”

“Oh-my-God-I-love-you-where?” Spying the two large paper cups in Larissa’s hand, she snatched one. “You have no idea how badly I need this.”

“No,” Larissa said, “but we could guess. How you been, stranger? We haven’t seen you all week. You still working on that client pitch?”

“Bartlett Ale? Not at the moment.” The potential account had her burning the candle at both ends the past couple of weeks. “But I’m behind on everything else.” She lifted off the cup lid and breathed deep. It was still warm, too. “You two are lifesavers.”

In more ways than one. Chloe and Larissa had been her best friends since corporate orientation four years ago. Delilah was pretty sure she wouldn’t have survived her move to the Big Apple without them.

“Hey, what are friends for if not to keep you caffeinated when you’re overworked?” Chloe replied. “What time did you get here anyway?”

“Not that long ago. Six-thirty, seven.” Earlier than usual.

Her two friends shook their heads. “There are easier ways to impress the boss than making sure you’re in before he is,” Chloe told her.

“I’m not trying to impress the boss,” Delilah immediately shot back. Not too much anyway. “And you two should talk. I don’t see either of you sleeping in.”

“Hey, this hour of the day is the only time I can get any wedding planning done, since Tom is always hogging the Wi-Fi,” Larissa pointed out. “I came in to surf for bridesmaid dress ideas.”

“And I like to beat the line at the coffee shop,” Chloe replied.

“So she can have plenty of time to flirt with the barista,” Larissa shot back.

“You’re just jealous because he gave me a free size upgrade.”

“I could so make a joke about that comment right now.”

“Please don’t,” Delilah said. “I already have the image in my head.”

Speaking of images.... She reached for the paper Chloe dropped on her desk. Sure enough, there was Simon Cartwright, a third of the way down the column, a beaming blonde draped on his arm.

“Finland Smythe again,” Chloe read over her shoulder. “She’s lasted a while.”

“Two months.” Longer than most. Their boss tended to collect girlfriends the way Delilah’s grandmother used to collect souvenir spoons. Fashion models, actresses, would-be fashion models and actresses, a literal parade of beauty, every one of them wearing the same thrilled expression.

Who could blame them? Delilah stared at the black-and-white image. What she wouldn’t give to be a woman exceptional enough to capture Simon Cartwright’s attention.

Like that was possible. Simon was... She nearly sighed out loud. What wasn’t he? The man was handsome, intelligent, sophisticated. You could literally feel the energy change in the room as soon as he walked in.

Her laptop had a better chance of attracting his attention.

“Ooh, look, here’s an ad for that bridal expo I was telling you guys about.” Larissa pointed to a bold-bordered box next to the society column. “You’re both still coming with me, right?”

Both Delilah and Chloe groaned. Since getting engaged to her stockbroker boyfriend, Larissa had been in nonstop bridal mode. “Do we have to?” Chloe asked.

“Yes you do. You’re my bridesmaids. Besides, it’ll be fun. We can look at bridesmaid dresses.”

“What happened to the ones you were looking at online this morning?” Chloe asked.

“Not on company time, I hope.”

All three women jumped. Delilah quickly turned the paper over. Simon Cartwright leaned against her cubicle opening, arms folded across his broad chest. Like it did every morning, Delilah’s pulse skipped a beat at the sight.

Dear Lord, but he took her breath away. It wasn’t that he was traditionally handsome. In fact, on a different man, the prominent nose and sensual lips might not work at all. On Simon though.... The strong features fit as perfectly as his custom-tailored suits. Today’s number was dove-gray, with a jacket cut narrow to emphasize his long, lean build. A swimmer in college, he still swam laps mornings before work. In fact, the damp curls at the base of his neck said he had just come from the pool.

“Good morning, ladies. I didn’t realize there was an intradepartmental meeting this morning. I would have brought pastries.”

“Prewrite coffee klatch

“Ahhh. Interesting. The things I miss not arriving earlier. Makes me wonder what other fun activities go on when I’m not here. Speaking of…” He turned to Larissa. “How are the wedding plans going, Ms. Boyd?”

“Very well, thank you,” her friend replied.

“Company server isn’t bogging down your internet searches?”

“I, um...no?” Her friend’s cheeks turned crimson. Ducking her head, she missed the momentary sparkle behind Simon’s sapphire eyes. Delilah caught it however; her stomach did another flip.

“Glad to hear it.” He turned his attention to Delilah. “When you’re done with your coffee klatch, I need you in my office.”

Need you. Okay, so he meant regarding business. When said in that rich baritone though, the words still managed to make her insides flutter. Pathetic? Yes. But so was being in love with your boss. If either Chloe or Larissa found out her little secret, she’d never live it down.

Fortunately, she was very good at keeping her feelings hidden. Tucking an imaginary brown strand behind her ear, she gave a quick nod. “Sure thing. Be right there.”

“Someone’s in a good mood,” Chloe noted. “I’m guessing last night went well.”

“Maybe.” As a rule, she preferred not to dwell on Simon’s romantic exploits. Bad enough the gossip columns insisted on rubbing the pictorial evidence in her face. Sitting around speculating only made her feel dumpy and depressed.

She grabbed a nearby legal pad. “Either way, I better get to work. We can gossip at lunch.” Although hopefully by then, a new topic would demand their attention.

CMT Worldwide occupied two floors of their Madison Avenue address. The first floor housed accounting and media. Creative and client services, Delilah’s division, took up most of the second. As head of the New York branch, and director of accounts, Simon’s office sat at the rear of the layout with a sprawling view of the skyline.

Simon stood at the far window bank, facing Madison Avenue. Tall and broad shouldered, with his hands clasped behind his back, he reminded Delilah of a prince surveying his kingdom. Suddenly self-conscious, she smoothed down the front of her blouse. She’d been trying to wear brighter colors these days, in an effort to look more vibrant. Today’s choice was a raspberry satin with pleats and cap sleeves that looked far more stylish on the mannequin. Then, everything seemed more stylish when she wasn’t standing near Simon. No matter what she wore, she felt impossibly drab and average in his orbit. Still, she smoothed the material anyway, and then brushed the bangs from her eyes for good measure before knocking loudly. Simon hated being approached without notice.

“You wanted to see me?”

He turned around. “Jim Bartlett has narrowed his choice to two agencies. Ours and Mediatopia.”

“Fantastic.” Doubly so, given how much work had gone into pitching them the past month. Ever since the brewer announced he was looking for a new advertising agency, Simon—and by extension Delilah and everyone else in the agency—had been working like crazy to convince Bartlett Ale that CMT was the perfect choice to sell their beverages. If Jim Bartlett was down to the final two, that meant the agency’s hard work had paid off. “When do they make their final decision?”

“End of next week.”

Sooner than they originally thought. So why wasn’t he smiling the way he normally did when the agency got good news? In fact, the good mood Larissa mentioned appeared to have faded altogether. “Is there a problem?” she asked. “You don’t sound very excited.”

“Sorry. Bit of a headache. Last night was...” Thankfully, he waved off the rest of the explanation and pulled out his chair. “As for Bartlett, don’t start dancing a victory dance quite yet. We have one more hurdle.”

“What kind of hurdle?” She sank into the chair across from him. If she had to create another PowerPoint presentation, she was going to scream.

“Apparently, Jim wants to spend some time getting to know each of the candidates on a more personal basis before making his final decision. The agency he likes best wins.”

Was that all? “Doesn’t sound like much of a hurdle to me.” More like a cake walk.

“Careful. We don’t want to get overconfident.”

“Maybe, but if we’re talking a charm contest between you and Roberto Montoya, I’d rather bet on you.” She’d seen Simon work a room. The man could sell rat poison to rats if he put his mind to it.

He flashed a row of perfect white teeth. “That’s what I like about you, Delilah. You’re good for my ego.”

Yeah, because he needed a boost from the likes of her. She watched him as he arranged the objects on his desk into neat piles and rows. “So what is it they want you to do?”

“Have dinner with them tonight in Boston and then tomorrow tour their brewery. We should be back early on Sunday.”

“Doesn’t sound too difficult. I’ll clear your sched— Wait, did you say *we*?”

Simon looked up from straightening his wireless mouse. “Yes, I did.”

“You...?” Delilah was pretty sure her mouth did a fishlike movement as she processed his answer. “You want me to go to Boston with you?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“No,” she rushed. “Not at all.” Overnight in Boston? With him? How could that possibly be a problem? If anything, the opportunity was too good to be true.

“Good, because as my assistant, you’ll be dealing with Bartlett as much as—if not more than—I will. Seeing how important this account is, I think it’s a good idea for them to get to know you, as well.”

“Sure. Yes. Of course. I’ll do anything you think will help, you know that.” Her excitement was making her babble.

That his lips slowly curled upward in response didn’t help matters. “I know you will,” he told her. “Makes me glad you’re on my side.”

Always, she wanted to reply. Fortunately, she kept her senses and her tongue, settling instead for tucking an imaginary strand of brown behind her ear to cover her blush. “I better go take care of the flight arrangements,” she said rising. Then she had to go home and pack. *Oh, dear Lord, pack!* The completely normal task suddenly seemed overwhelming. She was going to have to find Chloe and Larissa to ask them what she should wear. Then, at some point, she needed to tell her insides to settle down. This was a business trip; not a romantic weekend getaway.

“Delilah, wait!” Simon’s baritone reached her just as her foot reached the hallway. “Could you also dig up the name of the florist we use? I need to have some roses delivered.”

In her mind, Delilah heard a soft *pop!* as her excitement burst. As reminders went, she couldn’t do much harsher. “Sure thing,” she told him. “I’ll get it as soon as I return to my desk.”

Just as she had thought; the invitation was too good to be true.

Welcome to Boston, the airport sign read. Enjoy Your Visit.

Good old Boston, Massachusetts. Had it really been fifteen years since he’d visited?

Should have been longer, as far as Simon was concerned. Unfortunately, Jim Bartlett decided to base his operations here, and since he needed Jim Bartlett’s business, here he was. Otherwise, he’d never step foot in this godforsaken state again.

His breast pocket buzzed with text messages sent during the flight. Pulling out the phone, he read the top one on the call screen.

Got your roses. Go to hell.

At least she got straight to the point, unlike last night, when she insisted on going on and on.

Why did women always want to talk late at night only to get all dramatic because he’d rather sleep than share his feelings? Seriously, what did Finland think he was going to tell her? The

truth? He could imagine how well the truth would go over. *Sorry, Fin, but I don't have deeper feelings. I gave them up fifteen years ago.* Here, in Boston. Talk about coming full circle.

At that moment, the town car entered a tunnel, plunging the backseat into shadows. Jarred by the abrupt change, Simon's mind jumped to a different darkness. *Where you going, freshman?*

He shoved the voice from his head. He didn't have time for this when there was so much riding on his performance.

Damn, but the memories hadn't hit him this hard in years. He hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come.

He ran a hand along the back of his neck, grimacing at the dampness under his fingers.

"Headache bothering you? We could stop for some painkillers."

From her side of the car, Delilah watched him intently. For some reason, the concern in her blue eyes gave him the extra push he needed to regain control. "I've already taken more than I should. Another dose and my liver will stop functioning. Don't worry. I'll be all right. Bartlett won't even know I'm under the weather."

"You better be all right because if I have to carry the conversation, the agency's doomed." She ran a hand around her ear. "I'm not very good at small talk."

"I'm sure you'll be fine. You never seem to have a problem at work."

"Because I'm talking work and it's with people I know. Take away my agenda, and I'm screwed."

Come to think of it, the two of them did seem to limit their conversations to business. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time they had had a personal conversation. His previous assistants shared everything. Delilah appreciated the value of reticence. Almost too much. He needed to remind her to speak her mind more.

"Well, Bartlett made it very clear on the phone he doesn't want to talk about business at all tonight." Like a male Finland, he wanted to "get to know them as people."

"Yep, I'm screwed."

"I doubt you're that bad. What about when you go out clubbing? You talk to people then, right?"

She gave him a long, odd look. "If you want me to flirt, we're in bigger trouble."

"I don't want you to flirt." He tried to picture his assistant as a femme fatale and failed. "Just be yourself. The key to good small talk is to find some common ground. Shared experiences, that sort of thing."

"What if you don't have 'shared experiences'?"

“Then you put the attention back on them. People love to talk about themselves. And if you get really stuck tonight, you can always ask about beer.”

Her response was too soft to hear. “What?”

“I said we’re going to be doing a lot of talking about beer then.”

“So long as they talk about something.” He rubbed the back of his neck again. Damn muscles were as tight as rods. “I don’t have to tell you how important signing this account is. With the economy off, clients are scaling back their ad dollars in all three offices. An account Bartlett’s size would erase the deficit and keep us from having to lay off employees.”

“In other words, the agency’s financial future depends on how well you and I socialize over the next two days.”

She could have been listening in to a conversation with the board of directors, she managed to quote his father so accurately. “You’re catching on.”

“Great. So long as there’s no pressure.”

She didn’t know pressure. Yet again, the expectations his father placed on him were almost insurmountable. Thankfully this time he had an ally. So long as she didn’t clam up from shyness. If he was going to survive visiting Boston, he needed all the support he could get.

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