

A Triple Date with Danger
Three Romantic Suspense Novels
© Lois Winston

Love, Lies and a Double Shot of Deception

By Lois Winston

*Winner of the 2008 Winter Rose Award for Excellence in
Romantic Fiction*

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PROLOGUE

The journalists have constructed for themselves a little wooden chapel, which they also call the Temple of Fame, in which they put up and take down portraits all day long and make such a hammering you can't hear yourself speak.

Georg Lichtenberg

18th century critic and scientist

“Home sweet hell,” Emma muttered as she turned off the main road and guided the Mercedes down the tree-lined drive toward the house. Her estate. Not that she had any desire to return, but what choice did she have? Drive around Philadelphia into the wee hours of the morning? No, exhaustion precluded that option. She’d thought about checking into a hotel for the night, but she doubted the small Chestnut Hill hotel would have any available rooms this late, and she had no energy left to drive into Center

City. Better to slip upstairs and hope Phillip had forgotten their earlier confrontation.

Better yet, if she were lucky, he was still passed out where she'd left him and wouldn't wake until morning.

Right.

She laughed bitterly. When had luck ever paid her a visit? Unless it was rotten luck. She had that in spades. And every decision she'd made in her adult life only compounded her problems. Phillip headed the list. First and foremost.

"Emma the Masochist, that's me." She coasted to a stop on the cobblestone drive, set the parking brake, and turned her attention to the house she both loved and hated.

Only something wasn't right in Satanville.

Darkness enveloped the stately colonial, and only the repetitive clicking and chirping of the cicadas and crickets broke the stillness of the late August night. Less than two hours earlier, when she'd first pulled into the driveway and slipped inside, the house had been ablaze with lights, the air filled with raucous partying. Phillip's rowdy friends never called it a night this early.

Emma pushed open the unlocked front door and flipped on lights as she made her way down the central hallway toward the kitchen. Catering platters, still piled high with deli sandwiches, lined the kitchen counters. The back door stood ajar. Outside, half empty beer bottles and bowls of guacamole and salsa dotted the pool deck. Nacho chips and beer nuts littered the patio furniture and crunched beneath her feet. Still smoldering cigarette butts filled ashtrays. The sickeningly sweet aroma of pot hung in the air.

Where is everyone?

She stepped over a wet bikini bottom and noticed the suit's bra dangling from the diving board. Several other garments floated in

the calm water. Something had disrupted the alfresco festivities mid-debauch. But what? Who? Why? She'd like to think one of her civic-minded neighbors had ratted out her husband. Maybe at this very moment Phillip was cooling his Bruno Maglis in an eight by ten cell.

Wishful thinking. Phillip wielded too much power.

She headed back to the house and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Damp towels and an occasional swimsuit littered her path. A strip relay race? Nothing would surprise her.

As she entered the bedroom, she nearly tripped over a figure sprawled across the carpet. Phillip. Right where she'd left his sorry, passed-out-drunk ass. She cast a wary glance toward the bed. Empty. Maybe her luck was looking up for a change.

But she didn't dare leave Phillip on the floor. Reluctantly, she bent to rouse him; he refused to budge. Then she noticed his face. Halfway buried in the thick pile, his features were contorted into a grotesque waxy mask, his lips pale, his one exposed eye staring blankly up at her.

If she didn't feel guilty as hell, she'd celebrate.

ONE

Five-and-a-half months later

Winter wonderland, my ass.

The stinging wind whipped at Emma's exposed cheeks and brought tears to her eyes. Lowering her head, she trudged around the enormous mounds of black snow piled along the curb,

searching for a semi-safe path onto the sidewalk. Finding none, she grabbed a parking meter and hauled herself over the smallest of the soot-encrusted icebergs. Some people would go to any lengths for their morning cup of java, and she was one of them.

As she yanked open the door to Chapters and Verse, the “Spring Movement” of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* greeted her. Someone had a really warped sense of humor. Or hoped the power of positive thinking could affect weather patterns. Still, the music held a reminder that the harsh realities of early February in Philadelphia would eventually give way to sunshine and flowers come late March. Maybe. Last year they’d suffered through one of their worst blizzards ever the first week in April.

Emma shivered, thoughts of daffodils and crocuses quickly replaced by the chill rippling through her damp body. Shaking the moisture from her hair, she deposited her coat on a chair in the café, then headed for the coffee bar.

“Morning,” said the barista. “The usual?”

“Please.”

With her morning shot of caffeine and sugar in hand, Emma trolled the stacks of books, occasionally pulling a volume from the shelves and sliding it under her arm. She needed the predictability of this daily routine. It helped her get through the rest of the day. Every day.

Why the hell do I stay?

If she had any courage, she’d leave. Sell the house. Move away. Start over. But she couldn’t leave, and her reasons had little to do with a lack of courage. Life in Emmaville was just too damn complex. One part guilt, one part masochism. But how could she leave the only tangible reminder she had of life before everything had turned to shit?

So she stayed, losing herself in work that at least gave her the

satisfaction of knowing her efforts helped others. She pushed herself each day until exhaustion overcame her and she fell into nightmare-riddled sleep. Tomorrow morning the cycle would repeat itself. *I'm a twenty-first century Sisyphus, eternally damned to live out an unending punishment for my sins.* Not that she had a clue as to whatever sin first condemned her years before, but she'd certainly committed a whopper since then. Whether a sin of omission or commission, it hardly mattered. The result was the same.

Still, what would be the harm in a short escape? She deserved that much, didn't she? Emma closed her eyes and conjured up a distant memory of a sun-kissed Adriatic coastline. Hell, why not? She opened her eyes and headed for the travel section.

~*~

Logan Crawford's mind kept drifting back to the events of last night, an evening definitely not worth remembering. Even her name escaped him. Normally not a problem, but this time he was saddled with Candi-Randi-Bambi-whatever-the-hell-her-name-was for the length of his stay in Philadelphia. As head of the city's redevelopment office, she was his official escort-slash-liaison, the person assigned to make certain he chose the City of Brotherly Love as the East coast site for his corporate headquarters. And last night Candi-Randi-Bambi, a woman who wore her ambition emblazoned across her surgically augmented chest, made it abundantly clear just how far she'd go to get him to sign on the dotted line. And it was far from brotherly. Or sisterly.

Logan doubted he was the first billionaire businessman she'd bedded in her quest up the corporate ladder, but he'd wager a good portion of his sizeable fortune that he was the biggest—the *wunderkind* West Coast urban developer who was giving The Donald a run for his money. Only Logan had better hair—as the

media was quick to point out.

With a snap of his fingers, he could provide Candi-Randi-Bambi with an express elevator straight through the glass ceiling, and she knew it.

No fucking way in hell.

Last night when he stared down into Candi-Randi-Bambi's come-hither eyes, he saw the reflection of a disillusioned, unhappy man. And damn, up to that moment he hadn't even realized he'd been disillusioned or unhappy. He had wealth; he had power. So what was up with the sudden emptiness and dissatisfaction?

Beryl would say it was because he led a shallow life devoid of emotional commitment. As much as he protested to the contrary, he knew she was right. Maybe it was time to leave the bimbos to Trump.

Struck by the epiphany, he'd bolted from Candi-Randi-Bambi's bed. They'd used each other. She spread her legs hoping to advance her career; he'd taken advantage of the offer. Sex without emotional entanglements, the pattern of his adult life. He got the release he needed, and the woman got a notch on her bedpost. Only this time it hadn't worked. After thirty-eight years Logan Crawford realized it was time to grow up. Only damn it, he didn't have a clue how.

Still reeling from the self-revelation, he'd canceled his morning appointments and headed his rental car north, needing some time alone to think. After driving for half an hour he found himself in a quiet, upscale section of Philadelphia. A bookstore on top of a hill beckoned like a siren.

For the rest of his stay in Philadelphia he vowed to spend his nights curled up with a good thriller rather than a cheap thrill. Now all he had to do was find one. At the moment he couldn't

even find the damn fiction section in the boundless maze of shelves that wound around the first level of the two story megastore. Lost in the travel section, he spun on his heels and—
THUD!

Lost in Manhattan

**By Lois Winston
(writing as Emma Carlyle)**

ONE

“What made you suspect?”

Abel Montgomery puffed at the cigar that was as much a part of him as his ten fingers. He raised his head from the papers which had held his attention, exhaled a large puff of gray smoke, and looked across the desk at his longtime friend and attorney, John Ferguson. “He couldn’t look me in the eye. Never trust a man who can’t look you eye-to-eye, John.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s enough. Enough to raise my suspicions, anyway.” Abel tapped one of the papers with his index finger. “And now you’ve confirmed them.”

“Which explains your reason behind this.” John handed him a sheaf of documents and a pen. “All changed, just as you spelled out.”

Abel quickly perused the pages before dating and signing his name to them.

“How do you want to handle the situation?”

Abel pushed his chair back, rose, and turned to stare out the window of his corner office. Thirty-seven floors below people scurried along Lexington Avenue, most probably anxious to end the work week and begin the Labor Day weekend.

Abel, too, had been looking forward to the short holiday. The pressures of the past few weeks showed. The pains in his chest had increased, and no amount of Zantac or Maalox helped. He knew he should see a doctor, but there never seemed to be enough hours in the day. All he really needed was a relaxing three-day weekend alone with Whitney. She was the best medicine for his aches and pains. She could wipe years from his life in a matter of minutes.

“Abel?”

“Hmm?”

“I asked how you want to handle this. Are you feeling all right?”

“Never better. I’ll take care of things. Let’s keep this under wraps for now. I don’t want anyone else to know yet. Okay?”

“You’re the boss, but if you want some friendly advice, you should quit that vile habit.” John gestured toward the cigar. “It’s going to kill you someday.”

“I’m an old man. If they haven’t killed me yet, they’re not going to.”

“As your attorney, I feel obligated also to remind you that you’re in violation of a city ordinance against smoking in public

buildings.”

“You going to turn me in?” Abel chuckled. When John didn’t answer, he took several puffs before continuing. “I didn’t think so. Now, get out of here. Enjoy the weekend.”

John reached for the papers spread across Abel’s desk.

“Leave those. I’d like to study them further.”

“No problem. Try to relax this weekend. You look tired. I’ll see you Tuesday.”

Alone in his office Abel poured himself another cup of coffee from the pot his secretary kept filled on the credenza. Settling back into his desk chair, he studied the printouts yet again. Anger built within him.

Damn greedy, fucking son-of-a-bitch! He’d treated the man like a son, like the son he’d lost, groomed him to take over the company some day. And this was his thanks. Stabbed in the back by a common thief. If it weren’t for Sarah, he’d have the bastard hauled off to jail.

Sarah. God, she’d be devastated by this.

One of the brighter young members of Abel’s staff, Roger Caine caught Abel’s eye early. Roger’s polished charm and take-charge attitude paved his way up the corporate ladder with breakneck speed until he sat perched on one of the highest rungs.

When Cameron and Hollis died so suddenly, Roger had stepped in and kept the company running while the family dealt with its grief. Now, too late, Abel realized that Roger was an opportunist who’d taken advantage of a tragic situation. But had this always been his agenda, or had he seized the opportunity when fate dropped it in his lap?

All the caring, all the concern. Was it a carefully staged act? Even his feelings for Sarah? Roger had been especially attentive to her after the tragedy. The accidental death of her parents had

left her with deep emotional scars, her liveliness and independent nature becoming additional casualties of the explosion that had taken her parents.

Roger had helped Sarah through those dark days, and Sarah responded by falling in love with him. Aware of the powerful healing nature of love, Abel and his wife had encouraged the relationship.

But Sarah's pale blue eyes, which once danced with laughter, now often reflected hurt and unshed tears. Abel suspected the marriage was in trouble and blamed himself for his granddaughter's unhappiness. He'd encouraged the union between his brightest executive and his sole surviving heir. And Sarah, God love her, would do anything to please him.

What had he done to his granddaughter?

Abel opened the bottom drawer of his desk, removed a large bottle of Maalox, and chug-a-lugged the antacid. Then he spun his chair around and stared out at the darkening late afternoon sky. Dense thunderclouds, an ominous precursor to a weekend washout, had skulked in from across the river. He watched them build in mass, casting a thick black blanket over the city. And blackening his mood even further.

He wished Sarah would confide in him, but he knew her too well. She wouldn't say anything, even if asked, not wanting to worry him. Ever since she was a child, she'd insisted on battling her own dragons, whether real or imaginary. Sarah never asked for anyone's help. So, why wasn't she fighting the dragon now? What had caused her shoulders to slump in defeat when she thought he wasn't looking?

Able knew that if Sarah suspected Roger of embezzlement, she wouldn't think twice about coming to her grandfather. Likewise, if Roger were cheating on her. And her career was thriving. So

what was left?

He toyed with the idea of enlisting Whitney's help. After all, there were some things a young woman couldn't talk to her grandfather about, no matter how strong their relationship, and at thirty-seven his second wife was much closer in age to his twenty-eight year old granddaughter. With both her mother and grandmother gone, Sarah was sorely lacking in female confidantes.

But Abel had a bigger problem to contend with at the moment. Sarah's husband had stolen seven million dollars from Montgomery Aeronautics. The proof, in black and white, lay spread out across his desk.

He'd been a damn fool. He'd recover from the monetary loss. Seven million dollars was petty cash for a company the size of Montgomery Aeronautics. But could Sarah recover from her husband's betrayal?

Abel shifted his stogy to the side of his mouth, picked up the phone, and pushed the button for the lobby security desk.

"Yes, Mr. Montgomery?"

"Anyone left upstairs, Bill?"

"Just you and Mr. Caine, sir."

Abel placed the receiver back in its cradle and gathered the papers into a file folder. The evidence tucked under his arm, he strode down the hall to confront his grandson-in-law.

Roger stood at the bar in the corner of his office. Unseen, Abel watched from the doorway as Roger grabbed an ice cube with a pair of silver tongs and dropped it into a Baccarat tumbler. With a flourish he added a hefty splash of twelve-year-old Scotch.

"Celebrating?"

Roger spun around. "Abel! You started me. I thought you'd gone home hours ago."

“And I thought you’d be home having dinner with my granddaughter.”

“Soon. I had some work I wanted to finish up before the weekend.”

“Anything to do with this?” Abel thrust the folder at Roger.

“What is it?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Roger took a step back as Abel forced the file on him.

“Go on. Take it. Read it carefully. I’d like to hear your thoughts on the subject.”

Roger sat down at his desk and opened the file.

Even in the dimly lit office, Abel could see the man turn gray, sweat breaking out across his brow. Roger’s hand shook as he raised the glass to his mouth and polished off the Scotch in one gulp. “Surely, you don’t believe this!” He laughed nervously. “Someone’s gone to a lot of trouble to make it look like I’ve been stealing from the company. It’s probably that practical joker Danbury in accounting. Never could stand the guy. This time he’s gone too far.”

“This isn’t one of Danbury’s jokes.”

“Christ, Abel! Why would I steal from my own company?”

“*Your* company?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I? Perhaps you should explain it to me. Starting with why you stole seven million dollars from *my* company. Why, Roger? How could you do this to me? To Sarah?”

“Yes, Roger, explain it to him.”

Someone to Watch Over Me
By Lois Winston
(writing as Emma Carlyle)

*Winner of the Virginia Romance Writers
Fool for Love Award*

PROLOGUE

Philadelphia
Six Years Ago

“Dasha! More vodka!”

Dasha dropped the pot and scouring pad into the sink, grabbed another bottle of Stolli, and scurried across the kitchen. She stifled a yawn as she squinted through the tobacco-laden haze of the room at the clock over the stove. Another endless night of playing bar wench and scullery maid to her father and his vile cronies stretched out before her. What did they care that she had a calculus exam in less than nine hours?

Sergei Ivanichek slammed the deck of cards onto the table and yanked the bottle from her still sudsy grasp. “Guests first, stupid girl. Where’s your manners?” With a shaky hand he reached across the table to refill the three other glasses. The bottle clinked against Borka’s glass, spilling a small amount of the clear alcohol onto the plastic tablecloth.

Borka snorted. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. “I

think Sergei's had too much. Maybe now we can win back some of that money the thief's stolen from us tonight."

Grunting his agreement, Yuri took the bottle from Sergei and handed it back to Dasha. "Pour."

She did as she was told, then wiped up the puddle. After a loud belch, Sergei resumed shuffling, dealing each player several cards. Yuri and Vanya studied their hands, but Borka left his cards on the table, reaching for Dasha instead.

"Lovely," he said, wrapping his large, hairy arm around her waist. "You've grown into a real beauty, Dasha. I remember when you were no bigger than my knee. You'll make a good wife." He lowered his hand and stroked her backside.

Dasha jumped. Borka howled with amusement. Tightening his grasp, he pulled her down onto what little lap he had. The cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, ashes dropping onto her. One fat hand stroked her cheek. The hair-coated knuckles of his other hand grazed across her breast.

Dasha stiffened and winced. As much as she wanted to grab the vodka bottle and smash it over his head, she knew better than to cross any of the men sitting around her father's table. So she clenched her fists and bit her tongue.

Borka roared with laughter. "What are you now? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

Instead of answering, Dasha tried to squirm free. Borka's expression grew lecherous. "I may be old, but I'm still strong as a bull." He winked at the other men. "In every way that counts."

Yuri elbowed Vanya in the ribs. "And that's no bull."

The four men yucked it up.

Dasha froze.

"Seventeen," said Sergei, answering for her. He gulped down another shot of vodka.

“Seventeen?” Borka’s beady blue eyes grew wide with excitement.

“And the boy?” asked Vanya, motioning across the room to her brother Yusif.

Sergei glanced at his son. “Thirteen,” he muttered around his cigarette, but his eyes gleamed.

Dasha knew that look. Her father was as easy to read as a street sign. It was the same look that came over him whenever he made a killing at the track or at the craps tables in Atlantic City. Sergei Ivanichuk worshipped a green god with multiple zeros. She exchanged wary glances with her brother. He, too, had seen the glint in his father’s eyes.

“I’ll take them both,” said Borka. His hand slid up Dasha’s thigh. “My bed has been cold and empty for too long. Vanya can put the boy to work on the docks.” He turned to his second-in-command. “Yes?”

Vanya nodded.

“How much?” asked Sergei.

Borka shrugged. “We’ll work the details out tomorrow, my friend. Tonight we celebrate.” He removed the cigarette from his mouth and raised his glass in a toast. The three other men followed suit. “To my new bride!” he said, settling his free hand between Dasha’s legs.

All four men downed their vodka in one gulp. Then grabbing the back of Dasha’s head, Borka forced his tongue deep into her mouth, muffling her frightened cry. “Ha! You have much to learn, Dasha,” he said, breaking the kiss, “and I will enjoy teaching you.” He pushed her from his lap. “Pour another round, girl!”

* * *

Hours later Dasha lay awake in the double bed she shared with her younger sister. Thankfully, Anika had fallen asleep before

Borka, Yuri, and Vanya arrived. Out of sight, out of mind. Dasha shuddered. God only knew what fate they might have assigned the frail nine-year-old had she been awake. Sergei resented every penny he shelled out for his children's upkeep. He'd jump at the chance to rid himself of Anika, as well—especially if there were profit in it. The child stirred, snuggling her tiny body closer to her sister.

Every time Dasha closed her eyes, she saw a fat, hairy hand crushing her dreams. Felt a wet, slimy tongue choking the life from her. She stifled a sob. She had plans for her future, and they didn't include being forced to marry a man old enough to be her grandfather. This was America, not Russia. The twenty-first century, not the nineteenth. To everyone except Sergei Ivanichek and his throwback cohorts.

Even though her father had emigrated to America years before she was born, Sergei still held fast to his distant aristocratic roots. Dasha had long ago given up trying to discern truth from prevarication in what spilled from her father's often less-than-sober lips. Was he the descendent of a bastard of the House of Romanoff?

Over the years she'd heard the same claim from half the Russian-American population of Northeast Philadelphia. She found it highly unlikely that Czar Nicholas and his randy relatives had sown their seed from St. Petersburg all the way to Sergei's native Volgograd.

In the next room she heard her father snoring the sleep of a man who had drunk himself into a stupor. After he agreed to sell his son and daughter, Sergei and his friends had partied well into the night. Dasha knew from experience he wouldn't wake until late afternoon.

Across the room she heard her brother rise. The squeaking

floorboards echoed his progression from the bed to the closet. “Yusif! What are you doing?” she whispered.

“I’m going to kill that greedy son of a bitch! He’s not going to do this to us.”

Dasha leaned over and flicked on the bedside lamp. Her brother stood barefoot in the middle of the room, clutching a baseball bat. “No,” she said. “Put that down.” The time had come to implement her plan.

“Dasha!”

“Get dressed, Yusif.”

ONE

New York City

Six Years Later

“No! No! No!” With a sweep of his arm Niles York rid his desk of the four dozen eight-by-ten glossies.

Jake Prentiss sat back on the couch and watched the advertising executive seated across from Niles drop his jaw. His body soon followed as he scurried on all fours to retrieve the scattered photos. “But, sir.” The man flattened himself onto his belly to fish several photos from under the massive inlaid desk. “These are top models. Some of the most beautiful women in the world.”

“Beautiful, Hornlein? *Beautiful?*”

Hornlein hauled his whining, sorry ass off the floor and panted out a weak, “Yes, sir.”

Niles grabbed the photos and waved them in front of Hornlein's face. "If this is your idea of beauty, maybe I need a new agency to represent my companies." He turned to Jake. "Am I being unreasonable? Do you find any of these women remotely pretty, let alone beautiful?"

Jake rose from the sofa and sauntered across the room. He thumbed through the photos Niles offered him. "I suppose if you're into anorexia, silicone, Botox, and peroxide."

"Thank you! I'm glad someone understands." Niles took the photos from Jake and shoved them at Hornlein. "He gets it, and he's not even in the business. Why can't you?"

"I'm certain we can find the right spokesperson for you if you just give us a chance, Mr. York."

"We're set to open the flagship store in less than two months. Your agency's had more than enough time. I want someone signed, sealed and delivered by the end of next week, or I pull the account. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." He tamped the creased photos into a pile and placed them in his briefcase. With the briefcase clutched to his chest, he bobbed his balding head up and down as he backed out of the office. "By the end of next week."

"Moron," muttered Niles. "No wonder I have an ulcer." He strode across the room to a wall of built-in cabinets and pulled a bottle of Scotch from one of the shelves.

"That will help," said Jake.

Niles grunted. Filling two glasses, he handed one to Jake. "Don't play mother. I get enough of that from Beatrice."

Jake tossed back the Scotch in one gulp. "How is the lovable old battle ax?"

Niles choked down his own drink with a grimace. "Feisty as ever and thankfully off to Palm Beach for the season."

“Miss her already, huh?”

Niles sank into the sofa and propped his feet up on the freeform marble coffee table. “Actually, I’m glad to be rid of her for now. She thinks I’m going to lose my shirt on this one, and you know mother. She doesn’t exactly keep her opinions to herself.”

“Any chance she’s right?”

“I hope not. I think I’ve got a great concept. I did my homework, Jake. The market research agrees with me. Women today want the convenience of one-stop shopping, but my target consumer also wants selection and quality, not cheap schlock made in China, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. Being on a budget shouldn’t have to mean having to settle for second best. That’s the whole concept behind N.Y. McStore. The acronym says it all.”

“Not-Your-Mother’s-Chain-Store.”

“Exactly! No housecoats. No tabloids. And definitely nothing that will fall apart after one washing or break as soon as the limited warranty expires. Everything we carry will not only be upscale but affordable, it will be made in America. And bowing to the modern family oriented career woman who’s already dealing with time constraints, we’ll be offering all of our merchandise not only through retail establishments, but in catalogs and over the Internet.” Niles paused, the exuberance draining from his features. “But like any new venture, nothing is guaranteed. Beatrice could be right.”

“Then it’s a good thing you have a closet full of shirts.” Jake eyed his muscular friend. Several inches shorter and at least a dozen pounds heavier than he, Niles still looked like a wide receiver—even if he hadn’t set foot onto the Notre Dame gridiron in nearly two decades. “My shirts would never fit you.”

Niles snorted. “Some friend you are. Won’t even give me the

shirt off your back.”

Jake reached for his top button. “Be my guest.”

“That’s quite all right.” He held up a hand. “At least I know where to turn if it comes down to that.”

“Any time, buddy. You know that. So tell me, why all this angst over someone to smile at the cameras and cut a few ribbons?”

Niles paced back and forth across the room. “I’m not looking for arm candy. I want a face that will become synonymous with N.Y. McStore but also someone who can identify with its concept. She’ll be our spokesperson on TV and radio. Her face will be plastered across billboards and on buses. She’ll be at every store opening and online for chats with customers. She has to be someone our customers can relate to, someone who knows what it’s like to live within a budget and juggle a career and family responsibilities. I want my shoppers to think of her as a kindred soul.”

“And your target market wouldn’t associate with a woman who looked like she spent her days doing nothing more than getting her hair and nails done.”

“Exactly. So why is that so hard for Hornlein and the rest of those Madison Avenue idiots to understand?”

Jake was about to tell Niles he thought Hornlein was more interested in rubbing shoulders—not to mention various other body parts—with the models he’d suggested, but a light knock on the door cut him short.

“Come in,” Niles called, his voice gruff with annoyance.

* * *

From the other side of the door Dori Johnson heard the irritation in Mr. York’s voice. She hesitated. The earlier rumblings of dissension emanating from the corporate office had ceased with

the departure of one very rattled looking man, but it was obvious that Mr. York was still in one of his infamous moods.

A mere low-level drone in the York empire, Dori had never before come face-to-face with the volatile CEO and therefore, had never been on the receiving end of one of his legendary tirades. She wanted to keep it that way.

Glancing down at the package delivered moments earlier by courier, she wondered if she had made a huge mistake. Although stamped URGENT in large red letters, maybe it wasn't urgent enough for her to be disturbing the owner and chief executive officer. Maybe it could have waited until Mrs. Henshaw returned from her dentist appointment.

And maybe she should have thought of *that* before rapping her knuckles against the solid mahogany door. Now it was too late. She'd committed herself. Taking a deep breath, she turned the brass knob and crossed the threshold into the CEO's office.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but this just arrived." She held out the envelope without venturing further into the room. "It's marked urgent."

Mr. York, his features set in a stern grimace, turned from the other man in the room and confronted her. For several interminable seconds only the sound of Dori's rapidly beating heart filled her ears and the utter stillness blanketing the office. She stood motionless while Mr. York studied her as though he were sizing her up—or worse yet, undressing her. Dori couldn't be certain which. Neither pleased her.

She silently counted to ten and bit down on her tongue, stifling the acerbic comment that had nearly sprung from her lips. If she didn't keep her mouth firmly clamped, she'd guarantee herself a place on the unemployment line before the day ended.

To divert herself, she hazarded a quick glance at the other man.

Dressed in a pair of faded denim jeans, scuffed loafers, and a bulky cream and gray Scandinavian sweater, he at first appeared completely out of place in the well-appointed setting. His body language, however, told otherwise. His long legs stretched out across the coffee table. One arm rested on his thigh. The other draped the back of the leather sofa. Although he hadn't uttered a word, the man exuded an air of self-confidence that bordered on arrogance. He focused his attention on Mr. York.

When he caught Dori staring at him, he trapped her gaze with blue-black eyes as dark as his slightly unkempt thick head of hair and two-day growth of beard. Dori took a step backwards, swallowing a gasp. Her scalp tingled. Beneath her ribbed turtleneck, gooseflesh rose on her arms. Niles York might be undressing her with his eyes, but she sensed this man was far more dangerous. She had the unsettling feeling that he saw directly into her innermost thoughts.

The corners of his mouth turned up marginally as if he were privy to some private joke, but the smile didn't extend to his eyes, which remained dark and foreboding. Then he cleared his throat, breaking both his grip on Dori and the silence that had wrapped itself around the room.

“Who the hell are you?” barked Mr. York. “Where’s Henshaw?”

Stay calm. Don't let him rattle you, and for God's sake, don't be a smart ass. She squared her shoulders and fought back the anger threatening to enter her voice. “Mrs. Henshaw broke a tooth at lunch, sir. She’s at the dentist. I work downstairs in Human Resources. I’m just filling in until she returns.”

“You work for me?”

Smile, damn it! She pasted a smile across her face and answered. “Yes, sir.”

Mr. York continued jabbing his finger in her direction as he turned to the man seated on the sofa. “*This*, Jake. This is what I want. She’s perfect.”

The man on the sofa—Jake—stood. He crossed the room, his gaze slowly raking up and down her body. “Yes she is, but I think you might want to rephrase that statement, Niles, before you have this young woman screaming sexual harassment to the EEOC.” He turned those piercing near-ebony eyes on her once more. “What’s your name?”

“Johnson.” The word came out in a choked whisper. “Dori Johnson.”

The man nodded. “Well, Johnson Dori Johnson, I think you’d better come sit down. Niles is about to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Still holding firm to the doorknob, Dori glanced over her shoulder. “But the phone—”

“Screw the phone,” said Mr. York. “Get in here, and close the door behind you.”

All the gossip she’d heard about Niles York didn’t come close to preparing Dori for the bizarre situation she’d stumbled into. Suddenly she knew beyond a doubt how Alice felt as she plummeted down the rabbit hole. She stole a furtive glance in the direction of Mr. York’s friend Jake. The CEO rattled her, but for some reason this man’s very presence raised a host of red flags within her, filling her with an overwhelming urge to flee. Reluctantly, she closed the door and stepped farther into the office.

“Over there,” said Mr. York, waving at the black leather sofa. “Sit down.” As she passed in front of him, she offered him the mailer. He snatched it out of her hand and tossed it across the room. “I don’t have time for this nonsense.” The envelope landed

several feet shy of his desk.

Dori jumped. What in the world was going on? She hadn't tumbled down a rabbit hole, she'd stepped into some weird alternate universe!

Jake laughed. "Such tact, Niles." He took hold of Dori's elbow. "Maybe we'd better get you out of the line of fire."

The instant his fingers made contact with her arm, Dori's brain latched onto the romance novel she'd been reading the night before. Jake's touch, although gentlemanly, rocked her in much the same way Lady Bromshire had responded to Lord Farnsworth. And to think she'd actually scoffed when she'd read those passages about waves of searing heat rippling through the heroine's body. She'd never scoff again.

Jake gently nudged her toward the sofa. At first she couldn't move. Then, when she realized he was staring at her, she pulled her arm from his grasp and willed herself to cover the short distance on her own. With every step she felt the heat of his gaze on her back.

Once seated, Dori forced her attention from Jake to Mr. York. He'd made his way to a row of cabinets on the other side of the room. "Coffee?" he asked her.

"No...no, thank you. Sir."

Mr. York poured two cups of coffee and returned to the seating area. After handing one cup to Jake, he dropped into an overstuffed chair opposite the sofa, crossed his legs, and took a sip of his coffee. Jake seated himself on the sofa next to her.

"How long have you worked for me, Miss Johnson?"

Years ago Dori had vowed never to let any man control her destiny; yet, although she had no idea what was going on here, she had the strangest sense that her life was about to change. Dramatically.

Perched on the edge of the couch, she studied her questioner. What did he really want? CEO's didn't invite the corporate serfs into the office for tea and crumpets. "Six years," she said, trying to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

"Six years? You don't look old enough."

"I finished school early," she lied, dodging the insinuated question. By law she was under no obligation to divulge her age, but it was apparent that Mr. York expected her to offer the information. Lacing her fingers together on her lap, she fought the urge to flee. Questions about her past made her nervous.

"College graduate?"

"Not yet. I take evening courses."

"In marketing?"

"And computer science."

"Ever do any modeling?"

Modeling? The absurd question took her by surprise. "No, of course not."

"Ever want to?"

Of course she had wanted to. Doesn't every pubescent girl yearn to be the next Heidi Klum or Gisele Bundchen? At various points in her life she'd also harbored dreams of winning a gold medal in figure skating, walking in space, and being the first woman president—none of which had or would ever occur for obvious reasons. Hardly a leggy beauty, she wobbled on the ice, suffered from claustrophobia, and detested politics. So much for childhood fantasies. "No, not really." A nervous laugh peppered her words.

Mr. York raised an eyebrow. "You find the idea humorous, Miss Johnson?"

"I find it preposterous, Mr. York. I'm not exactly what you'd call model material."

“And why is that?”

Did the man need his eyes examined? “I’m neither tall enough, thin enough, nor glamorous enough,” she said, losing the battle to keep her annoyance in check. She watched as Mr. York and Jake exchanged glances. What was the purpose of this cross examination? Before she had a chance to ask, Mr. York changed the subject.

“Let me tell you about my latest business venture, Miss Johnson.”

And he did. For half an hour Niles York expounded on his N.Y. McStore concept as if he were selling the idea to a group of investors. He produced architectural renderings, marketing concept art, and demographic studies, tossing papers at her left and right until Dori’s head buzzed from an overload of data.

Normally, she would have absorbed such information without trouble. She had a head for facts and figures. What she lacked was a defense for the man sitting beside her. Jake’s hawk-like gaze bore into her throughout the CEO’s long discourse. Doing her best not to let him rattle her, she tried to concentrate on Mr. York’s words. At first she couldn’t fathom why she was the recipient of his long-winded presentation. Finally it dawned on her.

Niles York confirmed her suspicions with his closing sentence. “I want you for the face and voice of N.Y. McStore, Miss Johnson.”