



OFFICE ROMANCE

Suite
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By

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Sex is natural and fun, why fight it?

Every day, I look in the mirror.

Every day the old one gets nearer.

The lines and wrinkles with fear getting clearer.

Dedicated to...

No, not my mother. Dedicated to all you readers who have a love for simple pleasure. Life is too short to resist the fun.

CHAPTER 1

Christmas, 2014.

"This better not be a vibrator," I said.

My husband handed me his present. We set out a tree every year to put the few presents under it, but not as many as before. With Cindy Lee all grown up and in college down in Houston with her fiancé, holidays became lonelier.

Reggie grinned at me. "What if it is? This is your last year of youth, so you say."

I was thirty-nine, turning forty in February. On Valentine's day. I dreaded it. "I don't need to be reminded." I tore the gold foil-paper from the present with care and slid out a flat box. I shook it and listened to the thumping-sound inside. "You made something?"

His handsome smile spread wider. "Yeah, I threw something together real fast because I forgot to buy you something. Took me about three minutes." He was a custom carpenter-finisher. Had his own shop and crafted fabulous wood products for people: cabinets; wall units; paneling; custom furniture – everything.

I lifted the box lid and uncovered his cheap work. Only, it wasn't cheap – nothing with Reggie ever was. Lying in my lap was a hand-carved rich mahogany picture frame. Silver filigree was carefully inset in a pattern of vines. In the frame was our wedding picture – but not the professional one. This one had been taken by the best man with a disposable camera. It showed us laughing under a hail of rice and dashing for the limo. Slightly grainy, but both of us looked happy and young. We considered it our best unrehearsed picture ever taken. Tears welled in my eyes.

He frowned. "Aw, Lauren, don't cry."

"It's beautiful." It was.

"For your desk. I saw you had the photographer's photo in a cheapie frame. I thought you deserved better."

I leaned over and hugged him; he completed me as a person and I loved him in every way. "Thank you..."

I relaxed as his finger slid lightly over my nipples, then trailed down to my slowly warming clit. I let out a sigh as he found it.

He murmured, "Sexy as ever."

"I'm getting old." The prospect did not appeal to me.

"You're beautiful."

"I was."

"Still are." His fingers curled in, wiggling slowly into my folds. "I bet men flirt with you all the time."

I worked in a pharmaceutical plant as a human resources supervisor. I met and worked with a lot of people. "Ugh, no thanks."

He chuckled, sliding a finger in deeper. "Like who?"

I groaned. "Sam thinks I'd be the answer to his woes."

"See? You're beautiful."

Maybe I was. Certainly I looked like I was in my late twenties if you didn't get close enough to see the grays starting to show or the fine wrinkles at the corners of my eyes. "Sam is...jolly, shall we say? He thinks his bulk is beefcake."

"If he were more handsome?"

I laughed. "Workplace flirting is forbidden."

"But you allow it."

I shifted uneasily. "It's not up to me. And if I say anything, lodge a complaint, it will go on my record forever. I'll be a troublemaker; that's a career-killer, for sure."

"Well, too bad it wasn't a handsome guy, then."

"Whatever for? I have you."

He shrugged. "If someone is going to flirt with you, I'd rather he not look like Jabba the Hut."

"I don't want anyone flirting with me."

"But someone is. He should at least have the courtesy to be handsome."

His fingers began moving and I began gasping.

I brushed out my long hair. Naturally wavy, it was probably my best feature. My glasses made me look dumb, though Reggie thought they were sexy. Who could possibly be sexy in glasses? Ugh. My blouse did little to conceal I had small boobs. I was definitely no Kim Kardashian or anything else seen on the covers of Cosmopolitan: plastic and fake. No, I was not a mannequin-woman, I was just old me.

Black coffee and buttered toast was my usual breakfast on a workday. Eggs on the weekend. Never doughnuts, never pastries: I saw what those did to women my age.

Reggie kissed me as I watched my coffee steam into the air. "Love you."

I smiled up at him. In a life of routine, I was so glad to have him. "I love you, too."

"I have Jimmy in the garage pulling out some tools. Don't let him scare you." He had rented a larger shop just before Christmas: business was good. Our three-car garage had been used as storage for so long I had forgotten it was so big.

"Okay."

My eyes settled on the blinking coffee light without really seeing it. I need to fill two positions, today and have over three hundred applications to sift through. I sighed. I'm already tired.

In the garage, I jumped.

"Hi, Mrs. Daniels."

"Oh, you startled me." I thumbed my car lock.

"He didn't tell you I was out here?"

I saw Jimmy's pick-up parked up backwards, tailgate open. "Actually, he did. I've got my mind on work."

Jimmy was young, always wore baseball caps, and offered me a smile. "You look nice today."

"Oh." Do I? "Um, thank you."

He pinched the brow of his cap as if to tip it and went back to rummaging through some of the tool crates.

At work, I parked in my assigned spot and headed towards the blocky structure. I kept my ID card ready for the door swipe. Security was tight. Entering the glass door on the employees side, Jim greeted me with a nod. "Good morning."

I nodded to the security guard and went to the inner door. I swiped my ID card and went in. I immediately turned and slid my card into the employee terminal to log my entry and hours. It was all caught on camera, anyway, but KNR Pharmaceuticals kept redundant entries for maximum security.

My office was tiny and cramped. I had been downsized and my old office used to make room for another lab.

Bert leaned in. He was the plant general manager. "Put the two lab-tech searches on hold for right now."

This was odd. I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs. My pen tapped my chin. I waited, knowing his presence meant urgency when he could have sent an

email. His eyes darted down to my nylons, then back up to my eyes. It was too fast to be anything other than a glance. Perfectly acceptable and nothing inappropriate.

He said, "I have approval for you to hire an assistant. But not as a permanent hire."

I sighed. "The temp agencies?"

He nodded.

I carefully hid my disappointment. "They're so spotty on quality—"

He was nodding. "I know. But check them all first. Easier to dump them that way when we're done."

"Understood." In the current business climate, getting rid of people easily was sometimes as important as having what was needed to run an operation.

I looked at the wall where a window should have been. My old office on the same floor had boasted a window looking out over the lawns and parking lot. Second floor: couldn't get better than that. Except for this office. Where are we going to put an assistant?

CHAPTER 2

I looked over the faxed resumes from the temp services. Most of them were garbage. Though we were supposed to only receive qualified submittals, all of the agencies sent us a mixture: some qualified, most not.

Assistant manager of McDonalds? No. Branch manager of Domino's Pizza? No. Car salesman? No. But two caught my eye, one a very big surprise. The first one, not so much of a surprise was a personnel manager from Walmart, one Corey Dillon. Steady work, and then suddenly entered the temp agency. The second, and the best surprise of the month, was one Sandra Blevins, former lab specialist at a biotech firm that had been gobbled up by acquisition. She had everything we were looking for to fill one of the lab tech spots.

I called both agencies and arranged interviews with the two. Then I emailed Bert:

One of the agencies had someone with what we're looking for to fill the two lab-tech spots. Only one of the fifty-five submissions I reviewed looks like a possible assistant for me. Interviewing them both later today.

Our interview hours were strictly set – two in the afternoon to three-thirty. That kept access to a minimum and controlled who was wandering around the building to specific times. Both would be escorted to my office by a guard.

The first to arrive was Sandra Blevins. She was a pleasant woman, on the plump side, and had not only bench experience, but also a four-year degree in pharmaceutical chemistry. Once I had checked over her identification and made my notes, I said to her, "Do you have any objections to being hired outright at the end of your temporary term?"

Her eyes popped open in surprise. "No, of course not."

I nodded. "Some temporary workers don't like permanent work; they like the change of pace."

She shook her head. "Oh, not me."

"Why did you sign on with the temp agency? You could take this experience to many companies."

She made a face. "It's my sister's temp agency. I promised her I'd sign on to boost her roster while I look elsewhere."

"Have you found anything?"

"Not anything close. In fact, I was going to apply here but the application hours seemed odd."

I gave her a small smile. "Security precautions is all that is." I looked at her fax. "In fact, I'm sure if...Tergenex hadn't been bought out, they would've eventually adopted a similar practice."

She looked uncertain.

I said, "Many pharmaceuticals come under attack nowadays. A lot of discontented people out there wanting to blame drugs. Maybe they have a point or not, but security in this case becomes extremely crucial."

"I understand."

"Good. We'll sign with you for the three month term and hopefully you'll fit right in. Then we can see about making it permanent."

Her smile was like many other eager and happy smiles I had seen over the five years at KNR. When someone is given a job, sometimes it's their last lifeline to staying above water.

A man appeared in my door.

The guard said, "Here you are."

I rose and extended my hand. "I'm Mrs. Daniels."

He shook it, looking uncertain. "Corey Dillon." He was a very handsome man, clean-cut, well-dressed in off-the-rack slacks, dress shirt, and a very nice tie.

Some men wore really crappy ties; his was not. His wedding ring flashed on a hand with evenly-trimmed nails; he was not a biter. He was also slender, something of a rarity today.

I indicated the chair. "Sit."

He looked very uncomfortable.

"You handled applications at Walmart?"

"Among other things, yes. I hired, fired, trained, scheduled—"

"This position is temporary and involves going through about three hundred applications, along with calls to previous employers and the like."

"That's a lot, but easy enough."

I liked that attitude. I shifted in my seat and crossed my legs. His eyes dropped down to my nylons and he gulped. He dragged his eyes away and pursed his lips. I studied his face for a reaction. Hmm... I said, "Why did you leave Walmart?"

A dark look crossed over his face. "I was at the upper end of my position pay grade. They shifted me to the graveyard hours, despite my glowing performance reviews. It's what they do when they want you to quit so they can replace you with a lower pay grade employee."

I tapped my pen down onto the fax lightly. "You don't think they moved you there because that's where they needed you?"

He actually lifted an eyebrow at me and asked, "Have you ever filled out an application or been interviewed for a job at two in the morning?"

I laughed. "No, I haven't..."

He nodded. "Right." His smile was charming and white enough to show he took his teeth seriously. Many people didn't.

I decided I liked him. "I'll call the agency and let them know we're accepting you —"

"Great!" He was enthusiastic.

"Are you able to start Thursday?"

"Sure, of course."

"I'll need to take a picture of you for your ID card."

That familiar smile seen so many times in my office spread on his face. Don't get too happy, Corey. This is only temporary.

My work was heavier that post-Christmas season, and led right into KNR's New Year's Eve party.

I pondered my outfits.

Reggie leaned around me. "Wear a dress."

"Whatever for? Pantsuits are easier."

"You wear skirts most days, why not a proper dress?"

"This isn't like some big gala or something."

He shook his head. "It's New Year's. You should be in a cocktail dress."

I saw the propriety of going like that, but this was just my company's event. "It's not that fancy."

"Whatever."

"It's not black tie."

"Okay, okay."

I chose a slim-fitting dress. I wasn't tall and the dress wasn't long, but it looked just right. I really hate nylons, but I put them on to smooth over the panty lines.

Reggie was trying to be supportive. "Fantastic."

I sighed. "Stop it."

"I can't help it, you're beautiful."

I firmed my lips and dismissed the conversation. "Let's just go..."

His grin told me he wasn't buying my dismissal. "You're making me hungry."

I burst out laughing. "Would you stop it? I'm not some young thing anymore."

He shifted his slacks around. "Any man would die to have you."

"No one wants a forty year old."

"Well, you have two months until you turn forty."

"And you already have me."

He sidled up to me. "Mmm." He pecked my lips.

"Let's go." But I felt the warmth and love.

Each branch of KNR held its own parties. Christmas and New Year's with a three-day summer retreat and team-building gala at the best hotel in town. I mostly worked the summer event, doing my best to organize activities for the evenings. I even had a karaoke night the last summer.

The Grand Avenue Hotel was a modern construction with lighted trees, sconce entries and a doorman at the front. We went into the warmth and bright lights of the lobby. I knew where to go and so did Reggie. We passed the desk and concierge who looked up expectantly. I gave her a smile as we passed.

Down the broad hall to the ballroom at the end. We passed four other rooms being used on the way to ours. Springy commercial carpet with a pleasing tan and brown vine-pattern added to the warmth. I didn't bring a purse, so it was my husband that produced my ID card and his invitation. The guard at the door nodded and let us in.

We were met by the organizer, a small blonde woman who had been hired for it before. She carried a pad. "Mister and Mrs...?"

I said, "Reggie and Lauren Daniels."

She tapped her pad and smiled. "Your table is right over here." She was fast.

There were already people at our table and the little cards told us where to sit.

Corey looked up at me from my left. "Hello, Lauren."

I didn't wait for my husband to be a gentleman; I sat. He certainly was a gentleman, but I wasn't looking for a formal experience. "Hi, Corey."

He pointed next to him. "This is my wife Leane."

We reached together and shook hands lightly. I was stunned at her beauty. Long flowing blonde hair that looked like silk made me feel subconscious of my waves.

But it was Leane who spoke first. "Pleased to meet you. You have such lovely hair."

I laughed quietly. "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

Reggie touched my shoulder and I leaned back. He said to my assistant, "Reggie," and offered his hand.

"Corey. So you're the lucky man. Handsome devil." They shook. "And those are some work-hands. What line of work are you in?"

"Finish carpentry. Custom work."

"Good craft."

My husband grunted. "I love the smell of wood."

A mouth came down from behind me and planted a quick peck on my cheek. I groaned inwardly. Oh no...

CHAPTER 3

Sam clapped my husband's shoulder next. "Reggie, wasn't it?" They shook. Sam's wife Gina scowled at me.

I almost pouted. It's not my fault your husband thinks I'm better than you.

Introductions flowed for a moment.

The last to arrive at our table was my boss and his wife. Bert and Suzie sat across from us. I politely kept to myself as the others talked. I might have a career in human resources and talk a lot as part of the job, but I often liked to study people instead of blabbing endlessly about nothing.

Eventually, seeing as the men were oblivious, I said, "Excuse me," and rose. I went to the bar and ordered two drinks.

While waiting, a hand touched my waist, right above my butt.

I knew who it was and I didn't turn. "Sam, get your hand off of me."

The rotund man chuckled.

Another voice, Corey's said to him, "You know you can be fired for that."

"Aww, I'm just being friendly."

I turned and addressed Corey in a very dry tone. "Sam is always friendly. But it's good of you and everyone else to respect our rules. We have them for reasons."

Corey nodded. "Oh, I know. Walmart had them, too." He ordered drinks.

Sam huffed a little, but I kept my attention on Corey. "As strict as KNR?"

Corey chuckled. "Of course, but that didn't stop anyone except the most uptight."

I took my drinks from the bar. "It didn't?"

He grinned that suggestive smile of his. "I had to fire a guy and a gal who snuck into one of the camping displays. He fucked her right there while people passed by."

My eyes went large. "Camping display?"

"Yep. Just zipped down the tent. Thing was moving and you could hear them panting. It's not like it wasn't obvious. Made me wonder why they didn't arrange a break together and go out to their cars."

I sipped my drink as we walked back. "Amazing."

He gave me a wide-eyed look of assurance. "Oh, let me tell you, more of that went on than you could imagine. Blowjobs, fingering, masturbating..."

I coughed in alarm.

He chuckled. "Sorry. But it's the truth." He motioned with his head. "I saw Sam charge after you; thought you might need some back-up."

That made me feel good, and at the same time sorry that his contract was going to be terminated. He had been a huge help. "Oh, thank you. I appreciate it."

We sat and I gave my husband his drink. He whispered his thanks and kept talking to Bert.

New Year's always included the most anticipated event of the evening: the awards. Envelopes stuffed with cash were handed out for various goals exceeded. Accuracy, work safety, conduct, efficiency, sales, innovations, employee of the year...

I sat and watched people go up to the podium where Bert read from a piece of paper. They accepted their rewards to polite clapping and cheering. I had won the conduct award two years in a row.

This year was different.

Bert leaned down to the mic instead of adjusting it. "This year we have

something of a change."

The room quieted.

"Lauren is too nice. This year we're giving the conduct award to someone else."

My eyes widened. Gee, thanks.

"Lauren? Corey? Could you both come up here, please?"

I rose with a large measure of uncertainty. Temporaries were never seen on the stage.

We walked to the podium and stood.

Bert leaned down to the mic again. "This year's efficiency award is being given twice, to two very valuable employees for their work on maintaining our staff." He handed me an envelope and shook my hand. "Excellent work, Lauren."

Then he turned and shook Corey's hand without giving him the envelope. "We only hand these out to permanent employees. Your work was exemplary and I've been authorized to offer you a permanent position." His grin was wide. "Will you take it?" He moved the envelope fractionally.

Corey's mouth was open and that familiar smile of joy on his face. He blinked several times and gulped. "Yes! Yes, of course." He gripped Bert in a brief and excited hug. The he turned and grabbed me up, hugging me and jumping around in circles. He was laughing excitedly.

When he put me down, I said, "This is a shock."

Bert winked at me. "You both earned it. Now get off my stage."

Laughter from the employees made me blush.

Corey escorted me off with his hand on the small of my back. "Did you know about this?"

I felt a little self-conscious. I already have Gina scowling at me, I don't want Leane pitching in. She was nice. "No, it was a total surprise."

He didn't answer because we were at the table. He sat and kissed his wife and whispered excitedly to her.

Reggie leaned over to me. "That was a surprise, huh?"

"Sure was."

"Good for him; he looks like an enthusiastic worker."

I sat through the rest of the awards wondering how this was going to work for office space. Corey had sat with me in my already cramped office for the last week.

When Bert sat, I asked him, "How is this going to work with office space?"

He scratched his neck. "Well, we'll have to make do with what we have at the moment. There just isn't anything available except converting one of the storage rooms in the basement. And that will take some time if we do it. Or there's possibly the employee break room."

I felt a sinking feeling; moving off the second floor was always a demotion. I sure hope it isn't. Maybe there really is just no other option.

CHAPTER 4

Summer, 2015

I looked behind me, leaning back in my chair. I whispered, "Corey."

We were in our cubicled-area of the employee breakroom on the first floor.

"Hmm?" He was flicking through schedules on his screen. He wasn't quiet.

I rolled my chair over beside his and leaned.

He blinked several times, looking down at my stockinged legs.

I made a face, shifting my skirt to cover more of my thighs. I whispered again, "Did you hear that?" I held up my finger to my lips.

He frowned, his brow furrowing. He shook his head slowly.

I leaned to his ear. "I just heard Maureen talking to Gary. She said she started looking for better pay out of town."

He grunted, leaning away from me to rest his elbow on the other arm of his chair. "Hmm."

I pulled on his shirt, bringing his head closer. I didn't want to have to talk so loud he could hear and everyone else to hear, too.

His eyes widened and he searched my face as I pulled.

I whispered, "Maybe being down here isn't so bad."

He finally stayed close and kept his voice to a whisper. "I thought you said this was like a demotion."

"It always has been. But maybe this is actually to our benefit. We might be able

to work our way back upstairs."

His eyes dipped down to my blouse.

Oh, stop it and look at me. "If we know she's leaving..."

He looked back up. "Then we should be arranging her replacement."

"And any others we might accidentally hear, on purpose, if you catch my drift. Maybe we shouldn't try to block out the noise so much. If we were to have a prospect ready, we might both win efficiency again."

His eyes lit up. "Hell yeah, I could use another five grand."

I nodded with firmed lips. "You bet."

"You want me to break open the applications file?"

I shook my head. "There was nothing in there the last we looked; there won't be anything new in it now." I squeezed his arm, thinking. "Start right now asking the temp agencies to advertise for a lab-tech. They'll put out the ad and we'll snap up what they find."

"We don't want to place our own ad? Isn't that what we've been doing?"

"Yes, but if Bert knows we know something's up, we might never get back upstairs."

He leaned away again, talking a little louder. The room beyond the high cubicle walls sounded empty. "But maybe this is for the better. All of it."

I leaned away from him also and crossed my legs. His eyes dropped to my knee, but I let him stare; I was considering his words. "On second thought, I think you're right. We lose our advantage if we get moved back upstairs."

His eyes flicked up to mine and he wore that devilish grin. "What's worth more, the prestige of the second floor or a nice, fat envelope stuffed with cash at the end of the year?"

I laughed low. "I think maybe we're seeing things on the same page. You're

devious, you know that?" Yeah, why would we want to give up our advantage? I began rolling my chair back. His eyes followed my legs. I said, "I think I'll hit up the temp agencies in the nearest towns."

He raised his eyebrows. "Throw the net out wide?"

"Can't hurt. Maybe someone wants to move." I brought up the internet Yellow Pages.

I rode my husband with relish, moving sinuously.

He said, "You seem distracted and happy."

I blinked and looked down at him. "Oh, I was thinking of Corey."

He tensed up underneath me. "Were you? Something I need to worry about?"

I stopped moving completely and leaned on his chest, laughing. "Oh, no, sorry. Not like that. No, he and I discovered a nice little secret in the breakroom where they stuffed our cubicle."

"Huh?"

"We overheard one of the technicians saying how she was looking for another position."

"What's so great about that?"

"It gives us a clear heads up before she leaves. We decided we could use a temp agency so as not to alert Bert and maybe we'd see another fat cash envelope again this year."

"You get one every year."

"But not for efficiency."

"And you think this will really cinch it?"

I moved a little, then stopped again. "Yes. It's a huge disruption to lose even a

single tech. Timetables get thrown off, extra work hours put in to catch up, people have to cover extra work. If Corey and I can produce a replacement almost as soon as she leaves, the impact is minimal. Training time only, and that's about it. The loss of a single tech can cause weeks of delay in finding a replacement. Not always, but sometimes."

"Oh."

"So we're planning to be sneaky and listen as much as we can instead of blocking them out."

"Super secret spy bullshit?"

I moved with more confidence, riding his shaft up and down. "Sure, why not? The cash at the end of the year is nice."

He chuckled. "And here I thought you were thinking of Corey underneath you."

I stopped in shock. "Um, no. That's not something you have to worry about. He's been the perfect employee. Not a single inappropriate touch—"

"Like Sam?"

"Ugh, let's not talk about Sam."

I carefully applied my sorrowful face as Maureen Mullens sat in our cubicle. I read the notice of resignation with a concerned look. "We'll be sorry to lose you."

She was a bitchy woman, but performed her duties well. "It's a full two weeks."

"Yes, thank you. So your husband is relocating and you're following."

"Of course I am; I'm not crazy. If he moves, I go with him."

I touched her arm gently. "I fully understand; I just want to let management know your departure has nothing to do with KNR itself."

"Oh, okay."

I watched her leave the cubicle a moment later. Then I turned to Corey. "Still only three prospects?"

He gave me a pained look. "Three is pretty damned good."

"Yes, but they weren't very experienced. The best was the lab assistant without the degree?"

"Still the best, yes."

"At least he has bench experience. Call the agency and get him in here this week. Today if possible." I looked at the clock; it wasn't likely to happen today. "I'll maneuver the scheduling to include his training."

CHAPTER 5

Christmas 2015

I handed Reggie his gift; he started to shake it. "No, no, don't shake."

"Oh?" His grin and eyebrows made his wink a happy one. He carefully tore open the wrapping, then slit the packaging tape on the box.

I watched him pull out the elaborate cuckoo clock in awe. "For your office."

He breathed, "Wow." It was a large clock, direct from Germany that had little dancing men and women come out when the bird make its noise. "This is beautiful, thank you. Makes me feel cheap."

I shook my smaller present from him. "Oh?"

"Yeah, new plastic frames for your glasses."

*Uh huh, sure. I laughed and opened the present. It was a long jewelry box.
"Pearls?"*

"Just open it."

I was too curious to play the guessing game. I pried off the box lid and looked at the necklace laying on the velvet padding. A platinum necklace held a thumbnail-sized heart-shaped pendant studded with deep red rubies. This was no cheap gift. I lifted it out, heart pounding. "Oh, Reggie, it's beautiful."

He just smiled, saying nothing.

"Help me put it on."

He moved behind me on the sofa. I lifted my hair to the side and he clasped the necklace. The weight and cool of the metal was exciting against my skin. It

warmed quickly. His kiss to my neck sealed the gift. He said, "I thought you deserved something very nice being forty now."

"Forty-one in a couple of months."

"Quit getting ahead of yourself."

"I never thought I'd be so old."

He murmured in my ear, "And you look so beautiful for it."

I turned and hugged him.

I was standing, cup of coffee in hand, the Monday after Christmas. I could hear the employees talking in the breakroom outside my cubicle wall. Not hearing anything too pertinent, I sipped and enjoyed the morning jolt.

Corey came in, mug in hand. He smiled immediately and stood in front of me. "Excited about New Year's?" The party was Friday night.

I nodded. "My husband convinced me to wear a proper cocktail dress for it..." I trailed off as his finger touched my blouse at my neck, and then my skin. The tip of his finger sent chills down my arms and back as he moved my blouse. "What are you...?"

He looked curious. "Wow, that's quite a necklace."

Relief flooded me at having misunderstood his touch. "Oh!" I peeled my blouse apart enough for him to see. "Isn't it beautiful? My Christmas present from Reggie."

"Stunning." He looked up at my eyes. "Just like you."

I coughed and slapped his shoulder away. "Now you sound like my husband."

He chuckled and sipped his coffee. "He made that frame, right?" He moved his chin towards my desk. The gorgeous mahogany frame with silver filigreed inlay was a spot of luxury in an otherwise typical office cubicle.

I looked, my gaze lingering on it. "He did."

"Talented man; I envy him."

I wasn't sure what to say.

"The skill of working with your hands like that..." He sighed dreamily. "All I know is office-work."

I sat in my chair. "Surely you have a hobby?"

His eyes dropped to my thighs and lingered there. Then he looked away and sat. He crossed his leg and moved his coffee cup around. "I collect old black and white photos. Originals. Places, famous people."

I raised my eyebrows. "That sounds interesting."

His eyes went down again, looking at my stockings, my thighs, and up my blouse to my neck. Then his eyes met mine with curiosity. "What about you? Any hobbies?"

His eyes caused a warmth in passing and I cuddled my coffee with both hands. "I read books."

"Online?"

"No, actual honest-to-God books. I like to relax in bed and read."

His eyes swept me again. I felt no discomfort, though I began to wonder if I had lint on my stockings. What's he keep looking at? I stretched out one leg as if to check the tip of my shoe. Nope, that one's clean. But then I saw his eyes bright and following the movement. Darn, if I check my other leg, he'll think I'm displaying for him. Best not. Maybe I can sneak to the restroom.

His eyes were still on my thigh. "No Kindle for you?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to bother with cords. Just give me an old-fashioned hardback."

His smile widened and he was looking at my eyes now, thankfully. "Are we

throwbacks?"

"Hmm?" I looked at his tie to see if it was out of fashion, or had its own. It was a thin tie, but black silk with a golden tie clip. He had graduated to fitted shirts, possibly tailored and his slender physique was obvious, even as he half-slouched in his chair. My husband is more muscular. I raised my gaze to his face in expectation of his answer. His bold nose and sharp eyes set over a handsome mouth of rather thin lips. His hair was short, combed forward like some old Roman senator – possibly hiding a slightly receding hairline. I realized I didn't know his age.

He said, "You know, you like old-fashioned books and I like old photos. Aren't there devices now? Devices for everything. A device that tells time, sounds alarms, takes and keep pictures—"

"Yeah, it's called a phone." I laughed and remembered when phones didn't do it all. "If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?"

"Thirty nine."

"And holding?"

He leaned his head back and laughed. People over the cubicle wall quieted. He wiped at his eyes and then said, "Actually, I'm forty-four."

"Oh...the truth comes out."

His grin was sheepish. "I guess I'm an old guy, huh? How old are you?"

"Old. Forty." I made a face.

He chuckled. "Get out."

"What?" His eyes wandered over me again and made me wonder what he was thinking. I repeated, "What?"

"I wouldn't have put you past thirty-two."

"Oh please. All these wrinkles?"

He gave me a scoffing look. "You have the smoothest skin I've ever seen."

I pointed at the corner of my eyes. "Crow's feet."

He rolled his chair closer and leaned towards me. "Barely noticeable."

His words made me feel good. "Well, thanks. But how could you miss the grays?"

"You have grays? You do not."

I leaned closer to him, our heads about a foot apart. I pointed. "See?"

"Where?"

I lifted some hair. "You can see them if you look for them. Some whites, too."

"You're kidding."

I turned my head to look at him. "No, they're there." I noticed his eyes down at my blouse again. Is he looking at my necklace? His features had a pleased and satisfied look on them. His eyes dropped down to my thighs. I had spread them to lean towards him and my knees were a couple of feet apart and pushing my skirt dangerously high. I quickly adjusted my posture and turned my chair.

He said, "Well, you look fantastic."

"Thank you, my husband tells me that all the time."

CHAPTER 6

New Year's Eve 2015

I sat in the same chair as I had the year before. Apparently, the coordinator thought using the same schedule was efficient. I agreed with her.

Reggie was leaning around me and so was Corey; they were talking about the prospect of getting the efficiency bonus while Bert was off getting drinks. I felt warm and comfortable being so close to two men who had such an impact on my life: my husband whom I loved with all my heart; and my associate and friend Corey whom I treasured for his seamless cooperation with me on handling human resources.

I reflected on the past year. Sam had finally stopped flirting with me and Gina was not scowling at me this year. Work had been far easier with Corey's help and I felt that we had become close friends. Even Corey's wife Leane talked to me as if I was close to the family. I felt as if the year was closing with a satisfying ending.

I excused myself to get my second drink. I limited myself to two since I didn't want to embarrass myself doing something I normally wouldn't do. Three was too much for me.

Leane followed me. "Susie is a bore."

I cleared my throat and nodded slightly. I kept my voice low. "All she does is talk about her poodle."

"Ugh, I hate dogs."

I looked at her quizzically. "You do?"

"Not really, but I don't want one. Dog hair all over everything? No thanks."

We ordered our drinks and waited.

I said, "We had a dog once. The first time I stepped in a puddle was the last day that dog stepped foot in the house. She died a few years ago."

"Were you sad?"

I took up my drink. "Very. You become so attached. They're almost like people."

She lifted her drink and we stood at the edge of the bar. "Sometimes better than people."

I laughed.

She said, "Thank you for being such a good boss. For Corey."

"Me? I'm not really his boss..."

"You know what I mean. He's your assistant."

I sipped my drink. "I look at it more like we're partners. We answer to Bert."

"He talks a lot about you."

I covered my mouth and laughed. "Good things, I hope." My alarm twitched. Is Corey disappointed in me as his direct superior? My instincts never seemed turned off.

"Yes, good things. KNR is a big change from Walmart. A huge step up for him. We both appreciate it." She gripped my arm gently in a friendly squeeze.

Yes, definitely a satisfying year.

I couldn't hide my smile. I elbowed Corey on my left. He elbowed me back. We traded elbow nudges excitedly as Bert mockingly glared at us and shook his head.

Our boss said into the mic that still seemed too short for him, "And don't we all know who clinched the efficiency award again this year?"

There were some cheers and light-hearted boos, followed by laughter.

Bert shook his head as if severely disappointed, but was trying to hide his smile. "Maybe we should have a rule that you can't win two years in a row." He gave the crowd a look for support. "No?" His shoulders slumped dramatically. "Fine then, this year's efficiency award goes to that damned good team, Lauren Daniels and Corey Dillon. Get up here, you two, before I change my mind."

He couldn't, actually, it was a vote by the senior executives.

Between Corey and I elbowing each other, we managed to make it to the podium.

Bert was shaking his head the whole time. After handing us our envelopes, he said, "Get out of here. Both of you." He lowered his voice. "Excellent work. Most excellent. Upper management doubled your salary bonuses this year. You'll see it next week."

Corey lifted me up in a surprise move, jubilation in his eyes. He spun me around and kissed me on the lips before setting me down.

Bert growled, "Get off my stage."

My heart was racing from being picked up; it had startled me. We returned to the table.

Reggie whispered, "What was that end bit about? We couldn't hear him."

"Oh, double salary bonus on next paycheck."

His eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead. "Nice."

After the awards the dancing started.

I said, "Are you sure you don't want to dance?"

My husband waved his hand. "And make a fool of myself? My skill is here." He held up both hands. "Go on and dance with him – the two efficiency winners?"

You deserve it and you're certainly dressed for it."

I was wearing a blue, sleeveless sequin dress, mid-thigh, and showing off my pendant necklace. I thought I looked dumb wearing it with my glasses, but I needed to be able to see. "Well, okay." I shifted back to Corey who had asked me to dance. "Why not?"

Leane clapped silently and gave me a warm smile.

He led me to the dance floor and lightly took me in his arms. One hand on the small of my back, we danced a slower dance. His other hand held mine up and he moved us in a ballroom-style waltz.

I asked, "Where did you learn to dance like this?" I was having a little difficulty anticipating his moves, but fell into his pattern in the first few minutes.

"Dancing lessons in high school. Don't tell anyone."

I giggled. "No need to be embarrassed, many men can't dance. Most kinda stand there gyrating and move their arms around."

He gave me a level look. "Yeah, I can do that, too."

We spun and moved perfectly by the second dance. I was having fun.

He said, "You look beautiful, tonight."

It felt good to hear it, but I said, "Oh please."

"No, you do. Well, you always look beautiful."

I laughed. "What are you buttering me up for? You want my job or something?"

"Can't I compliment a lady without someone wondering if I'm after something?"

I went silent, feeling the warmth of his sincerity suffuse my limbs. I became aware of him pressed against me, even in this casual dance. Though his hands did not wander, I began feeling a build-up of heat inside me and I trembled slightly in his arms. My body moved with his, pressed together and I became acutely aware of his manhood pressed right where it should be between my

thighs. I think I was possibly enjoying the dance too much.

He brought his head to the side of mine as we moved at the end of the second dance. He said into my ear, "Thank you for the dance. I really enjoyed it."

Yes, I can feel your enjoyment. Thrills ran up and down my back from his warm breath in my ear and on my neck. I could not only feel his manhood, but the rest of him, too. His thighs, his hips, his flat stomach and slender chest. The hint of five o'clock shadow brushing my cheek sent shivers down my neck and back.

I was relieved to stop dancing when the music ended. We approached the table and I saw nothing there that alarmed me. Reggie was chatting with Sam and Gina, waving his glass around descriptively. Leane was twisted around watching us with a curious smile.

She said, "How did you do that? I can't keep up with his changes."

"Anticipation is all. About halfway through the first dance, I could tell by his pressure at certain points where he was going."

She laughed in disbelief. "Pressure? I dance with him and I step all over my own feet."

"Oh, I did, too, at first. I guess I'm used to anticipating him."

Leane nodded. "That's probably why you two work so well together."

Indeed. Yes, indeed.

CHAPTER 7

January, 2016

I was called the fourth day back at work in the new year. "Lauren, would you and Corey come up to conference room C please?" Bert's voice was subdued.

"Of course." I clicked off and rose. "Corey."

"Hmm?" He was scanning incoming product schedules.

"Leave that. We have a conference."

"Oh?" He rose. "Which room?"

"C."

He grabbed his jacket and shrugged it on. "I hope this isn't bad news." Conference room C was used for high level hiring and firing. Mostly firing.

He followed me to the elevator and I swiped my card. The doors whooshed quietly open and we stepped inside. I said, "Black is bad."

"Black suits?"

I nodded. "That's corporate coming to terminate someone's position."

The elevator stopped too soon and I felt tremors begin in my arms. We walked out and turned, passing the executive reception desk. Florence barely glanced at us. We weren't an uncommon sight up here where we used to be.

The glass walls of Conference room C offered a perfect view inside and out of people finding the end of their employment. As if the executives and corporate wanted everyone to see their dirty work. I saw the suits, and they were black. I whispered, "Oh my god..."

Corey squeezed my elbow and opened the door first. I followed him in. Four faces stared at us with stony expressions; Bert's and his secretary Anita's faces showing displeasure. The two black suits sitting between them were even wearing sunglasses. I thought for sure this was some Matrix agent duo come to eliminate us.

We sat in the silence.

This is so not good...

One of the black suits removed his sunglasses. "Corey Dillon?"

My assistant sounded confident, but subdued. "Yes?"

The suit turned to me. "Lauren Daniels?"

I nodded, knowing I couldn't make a noise without sounding like a run-over frog.

He spoke quickly, clipped, and to the point. "I'm Christopher Teague, Corporate Relations. This is Donald Slaughter, also corporate relations."

Great. What a name for firing people. Slaughter. Just great.

He said with a very thin and wicked smile, "We want to terminate your employment here."

The blood drained out of my head, leaving me dizzy and hearing buzzing noises.

He kept that wicked smile and slowly slid two papers across the table. "And offer you positions at corporate headquarters."

I croaked, "What?"

Bert grumbled, "I'm not real happy about losing my two best employees."

Donald Slaughter took a slow look at Bert. "Hire some more."

Christopher didn't even look at him. "These are the details of the positions, including salaries and benefits." He sat back and adjusted his coat, a very smug look on his face.

We took the offered papers and I scanned mine. I opened my mouth and tried to gasp quietly. Tingles ran along my arms in shock as I read the salary.

Corey cleared his throat.

Christopher straightened right away. "We're here overnight, leaving tomorrow morning. We would appreciate a response by then."

I said, "Why weren't we contacted by Human Resources—"

Donald said, "Gordon Stearns retired in October. Alicia Vargas has taken health leave – breast cancer and not expected to survive."

Christopher said, "Pardon us for having a little fun in offering you two these positions; it's always a laugh seeing people go pasty white."

Donald chuckled.

You jerks. "I..."

Christopher said, "Take the rest of the day off and talk it over with your spouses and let us know in the morning. The positions start Monday."

"Reggie?" I walked into his shop that smelled of sawdust and varnish. The aroma was pleasant and relaxing.

"Hey? Lauren?"

"Yeah, it's me." I saw him, hunched over a frame of some sort.

He stood and wiped his hands on a rag. His face was a mixture of concern. "What's the matter? Why aren't you at work?" I could hear the fear in his voice that I'd been fired.

I didn't know what to say, I was brimming with a buzz so powerful that all I could do was hand him the paper.

He took it and I watched his eyes flick back and forth. They widened and he whistled. "Is this what I think it is?"

I nodded. "They want me and Corey at corporate."

He began laughing with relief and appreciation. "Awesome! This is fantastic!"

"Is it?"

He coughed and looked at me as if I were dumb. "Are you kidding? We'll have to move. I can close up here and open up a shop there. So what? This is..." He read the paper again.

I said, "Almost triple my current pay between salary increases and bonuses."

He shook his head. "I hope you didn't decline—"

"No, but I wanted to talk to you first."

He laughed and took a breath. "Do it!"

"We'll move?"

"Absolutely. I can work wood anywhere."

I went to him and hugged him, feeling a release of tension I hadn't known was building. "Thank you."

"Corey, too, huh?"

"He almost fainted in the elevator. He crashed into three walls on the way out and kept stumbling."

"You said he had been at Walmart, right?"

"Yes, a meteoric rise for him."

"This is fantastic."

"I start work Monday."

He rubbed his forehead, smearing some dust across it. "Wow, so you'll be up there while I arrange the move here."

"I'm sorry, Reggie, but they had their only other human resources executive show up with breast cancer. They need us immediately."

"Ouch. But no problems. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices to seize opportunities like this." He handed back the paper, nodding. "Take it and don't worry about me. I'll hire a moving company and put the house up for sale. We'll rent if we have to."

I nodded, sighing. "I'll need to make hotel reservations. There's one less than a mile from corporate."

He squeezed me and kissed me on the lips. "I love you; you deserve this. Now go make your arrangements."

CHAPTER 8

I drove. A nine hour drive with Corey was as comfortable as being alone. We decided to just share the car together rather than drive two cars up there. We had booked two rooms for two weeks until we heard news about our spouses and their progress on moving. We could even walk to work if the weather was good.

Corey sighed, "I'm not going to like the traffic."

"Have Leane drive."

"Do you have an answer for everything?"

"I should hope so – on the things that matter, anyway. Is this our exit?"

"Yep." He straightened in the passenger seat.

I took the exit and slowed behind a line of cars. "I wonder how different this will all be?"

"Hmm?"

"Corporate. We'll be managing the staffing of the sales force, primarily. Office staff is easy."

"Salespeople are quirky. A little bit crazy to push a product through so many rejections or into a market that doesn't want to be broken open."

I looked over at him and inched forward as the line moved. "You had sales associates at Walmart?"

"No, no, not like what I'm talking about. My brother is a sales associate for a medical instrument manufacturer. I think he got dropped on the head when he was a kid."

I laughed. "Oh."

"My mother said Brandon was going to be the star of the family. I don't know now; I might have him beat with this position."

I let the car move forward with the others as the light turned green. "We'll do this together. Just like we did at our branch."

"I hope it works."

"Our temp-focus?"

"All of it. Circulating, listening, trying to be ahead of staffing changes."

"I won't have to do the summer team-building coordination. That's a relief."

"You did well on the last one."

"Sure, everybody gets to relax but me." I looked up past the rearview mirror.
"That's our hotel."

"Nice."

I used the guest parking in front and got out. The front drive was almost filled.
"Wow, busy."

We went inside and waited in line at the counter. Four clerks were busy, heads bent down moving hands and looking at screens.

I went first. "Reservation for Lauren Daniels."

The young man who looked like he couldn't possibly grow a beard typed on his computer terminal. "Mrs. Daniels?"

"Yes."

He looked at me sadly. "We're sorry, we had to cancel your reservation."

"What?"

"We had to cancel your reservation. There's a convention—"

I wasn't putting up with that. "Pardon me, I had a reservation."

"Yes. We're sorry we had to cancel it."

"How can you cancel a reservation?"

"I'm sorry. We have already refunded your Visa—"

I shook my head. "No, no, no—"

A sharply dressed lady with a scarf around her neck and a nametag came up behind the clerk. Her nametag said Tricia, Assistant Manager. "Is there something I can help you with, ma'am?"

I put my hands on the counter. "Yes, I have reservations."

Her eyes glanced down to the screen. The clerk's eyes went up to hers as he pointed. Tricia frowned and shook her head slowly. "I'm so very sorry, Mrs. Daniels, but your reservation was canceled. With the exposition—"

"How can you cancel my reservation?"

"The emerging technologies exposition is one of the ten largest we have here every year. Sometimes this happens."

I blew out a breath. Okay, okay, fine. "All right then, can you recommend the nearest hotel—"

Tricia was shaking her head slowly again. "I'm really very sorry, but without reservations you won't find anything this week unless you don't mind driving four hours."

"Are you kidding?"

"This is an international exposition. Every year we're booked out for two hundred miles."

"I have to go to work."

"I'm sorry. If you'd like to use our phones, they're right over there. In the meantime, would you be so kind as to let the customers behind you check in?"

This is insane. How am I supposed to go to work? I moved aside and let a

perplexed and anxious Corey take my place.

He cleared his throat nervously. "Reservation for Corey Dillon?" He slid his driver's license across.

Tricia watched the young clerk look at it and type on his terminal.

"Yes, here we are."

I coughed and walked towards the couches. I mumbled to myself. "Great. Mine gets canceled. Because mine was the bigger room?" I looked back, mouthing in whispers towards Tricia. "You gave my room to a higher bidder, didn't you?"

Tricia glanced my way a couple of times, then walked along the counter behind the other clerks, supervising.

I sat in defeat on an over-stuffed chair.

Corey approached me wagging a keycard reluctantly. "Sorry about that."

I hung my head. "It's not your fault."

"Let's park and go up. You can use my phone and phonebook in there. We'll find you a place."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. It's gotta be done."

I sat on one of the beds and wanted to cry. "They hung up on me."

Corey sat down next to me and handed me a drink from the little bar. "Here. That was the last place?"

"I've called every one of them, including the motels. If I didn't have a reservation..."

"Call downstairs. Maybe they had a cancellation."

"I'm telling you, they sold off my room to a higher bidder. I had two rooms. A big sofa to stretch out on, a flat-screen TV..."

"Sounds nice." He indicated his room. "I got the basic. Can't shake my frugality even with this big raise."

"I should've done the same."

"You couldn't have known. Call and see—"

I grabbed the phone up. "Yes." A moment later, I replaced the handset. "Nothing."

He put his hand on mine. "You...can stay in here with me, if you want."

I looked at him sharply.

He removed his hand. "Just until this convention blows over and you can get a room. I'm a nice guy."

I laughed in dejection. "I know you are." I blew out a loud breath through my nose. "Would you really do that for me?"

He looked back and forth between the beds. "I can't sleep in two beds. You might as well use it."

I searched his face for deception, but saw none. I lowered my head. "What would my husband think? Your wife? Goodness, this has bad written all over it."

He touched me again. "It doesn't have to be bad. Finish that and we'll go get your things. Then I'll take you out for real drinks."

I looked at him hopefully.

He smiled. "Cheer up. We're here and will be working corporate. You and me."

I nodded.

"We'll look back in a year and laugh at all of this."

CHAPTER 9

I nodded into my phone. "Yep, all settled in."

Reggie asked, "How do you like that fancy room?"

"Oh, um...I had to settle for a smaller room. Big emerging technology exposition going on. People and companies from all over the world." I glanced quickly at Corey and made a scared face. There is no way either of our spouses would understand. He winked and finished off his drink.

"Aw, shame. I met with a realtor today and got the listing going. I'll need to fax you up some papers to sign."

"I'll give you my work fax tomorrow when I check in."

"Sounds good."

"I'm going to go grab a drink with Corey – unwind from all this."

He chuckled. "I envy you. But I'll be up there as soon as I can."

"Yeah. Love you."

"I love you, too."

I clicked off and sighed with relief.

Corey said, "Let's get out of here. The lounge downstairs is really nice."

"When are you going to call Leane?"

"Already did, when I was downstairs looking at the restaurant and lounge."

"Did you tell her?"

He coughed and snorted. "Yeah, of course."

"Are you serious?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding? No, I didn't tell her. I'm just not sure she'd understand."

I went with him out the door. "I know, right? I just can't see Reggie understanding, either."

"We'll just keep it to ourselves."

The lounge was posh. This was no disco type of club with loud noises and smoke. Men in business suits mingled with tech-nerds in sweaters and slacks. Women in cocktail dresses and business suits sat drinking and talking.

We settled up to the bar and I sat two stools from him. I didn't want to give the impression I was with him: it was only proper. "Strawberry margarita, please."

The bartender nodded wordlessly and set about making the drink.

Corey said, "I'll have the same. Sounds refreshing."

The bartender glanced back and forth. "Separate tabs?"

Corey frowned. "I'll buy."

Drink in hand, I let out a sigh. "Thanks for the extra bed. I would have hated to show up after having slept in my car."

"I wouldn't do that to you."

We sipped for a bit and some man climbed between us. He was in an expensive tailored suit and was immaculately groomed. "This seat isn't taken, is it?" He was already sitting on it.

I shook my head. "Nope."

"Here for the expo?"

I was looking straight ahead, into the mirror. "Nope."

He took on a pained look. He made a show of flicking out his wrist and twisting,

checking the time on his Rolex. His frown said he had important matters on the mind. Finally, seeing that I wasn't interested, he extended his hand. "Trent Fletcher of Fletcher Industries. You are?"

I reluctantly shook his hand. "Lauren Daniels, Human Resources Executive Manager at KNR Pharmaceuticals."

He smirked. "Ah, one of the little companies."

I gave him a sidelong look. "KNR is multi-national. We have over forty branches in ten different countries—"

He chuckled.

I didn't like him.

He did the twisty wrist thing again and frowned at his watch as if he was real important.

I looked away.

"I see the ring; are you waiting for your husband?"

"No."

"I know this place out on the lake. Fabulous food. How about we have my limo driver—"

"No."

He did the twisty wrist thing again. "I'm a very important man—"

I whispered loud enough for him and Corey and the bartender to hear, "Why don't you go be important somewhere else?"

He got up abruptly and said out loud, "I don't pay women for my company." He straightened his jacket and walked away.

Corey said, "You want me to beat a tattoo on the guy's face?"

I started laughing, and at the same time fuming at the nerve of the jerk

insinuating I was a call girl for all to hear. I got up and moved to the stool next to Corey's. I gave him a look. "Maybe people will think we're married and leave us alone."

He grunted. "Good idea. I won't tell if you don't."

"Well, I'm not worried about egotistical men, I'd be rather concerned that someone from KNR sees us. Don't want that kind of question staining us before we even start."

He grunted his assent and drank.

I had nothing to worry about when it came to sleeping in the same room with him. The only awkward moments were when we both climbed into bed. I mean, thank God there were two beds. But I would've slept on the floor before sharing a bed with him. My sleepwear was t-shirt and panties. His was boxers.

I surreptitiously looked to see if he was trying to watch me get into bed. He wasn't and I breathed a sigh of relief. This is going to work. When he had been getting into bed before me, I had seen him undressed for the first time. He definitely was slender with a slight hint of muscular tone to his build. Not even a swimmer's physique, more of a long-distance bicyclist. I averted my eyes from the suggestive hint of something swinging in his boxers as he moved. I put my back to him and read my magazine. I wish I had my own room. I wish Reggie was here.

I turned the light out early, wanting to get as much sleep as possible before starting early in the morning.

I slept fitfully. That wasn't unusual as I didn't sleep all that well in strange beds. Scratchy sheets, odd cleaning smells, and the loud hum of the heater competed with the too-hot, too-cold air typical of a hotel room. My two-room suite had boasted a thermostat like one would see in a home. This room had a wall unit under the window.

I got up at three in the morning, just wanting the bad sleep experience to be over. Excited for my new day, I procured the bathroom while Corey turned over in his bed. I had brought all my typical toiletries; I hate hotel soap – it made me itch.

Despite the unfamiliarity of the showerhead's spray, I quickly eased into my routine and finished feeling much like myself. This was my big day.

I came out feeling ready for coffee.

Corey was sitting in bed, the covers pulled over his crotch. He rubbed his face and grumped at me, "How do you do that?"

"Huh?"

"How do you go to bed looking wonderful, get up looking just as good, and come out of the bathroom looking like you didn't even have to prepare yourself? You even smell incredible."

I laughed incredulously, thinking of the time it took to fix myself up. "Uh..."

"I mean, look at me. I look like something a dog chewed, a cat scratched, and a lion mauled."

I laughed. "You want me to bring up coffee?"

He groaned. "Please. Please. Please."

I laughed and shook my head. "Bathroom's all yours." I checked my purse for my keycard and went out. For the billionth time, I felt fortunate to have Corey as an assistant. There is nothing like someone who works so well with you that work is smoother than glass.

The cafeteria staff was preparing breakfast and the sign said we had an hour to go before it was presented. But the six coffee machines were clicking and steaming away. I chose an organic dark roast, full caffeine and poured two cups. Based on Corey's groan, I knew he would prefer it over decaffeinated. But really, what kind of dysfunctional nitwit drinks decaffeinated to wake them up? I left it black and poured four cups, placing them on a cafeteria tray.

A voice intruded. "I didn't know this hotel allowed hookers to steal the coffee."

Anger flared up in me so fast that I acted before thinking. I turned and feigned catching my heel in the carpet. "Oops!" I tilted the tray with a push and flung all four cups into Mister Fucking Fletcher of Fucking Fletcher Industries.

His eyes widened and he held out his hands. Then he started shouting and jumping as the hot liquid soaked through.

I put my hand over my mouth. "Oh my goodness, dear me, I am so sorry."

He hopped away, breaking into a run.

Faces were looking out over the counter.

I shrugged and shook my head. I quickly poured four more and walked as fast as I could out of there in case Mister Fucking Fletcher called Hotel Fucking Security on me. Fuck him anyway. Maybe I should have had Corey tattoo his face with bruises.

Corey was still in the bathroom, but the coffee was scalding hot. I hope Fletcher-dick got burned. I turned on the TV to the Weather Channel and watched the forecast. Cloudy, bitterly cold, and possible ice. I'm not walking to work today.

Corey came out a bit later looking like the dog, cat, and lion hadn't seen him. "That smells good."

"I dumped four on that Fletcher man from last night."

He was fixing his cuffs and froze. "You serious?"

"Yeah, he said that he didn't know the hotel allowed hookers to steal the coffee."

He frowned and scowled. "You should have dumped the whole damned pot on him. The nerve of the asshole."

I could feel his anger against the man for me and it felt comforting. "Let's not let it spoil this day." I handed him a coffee.

He sipped, then gulped and nodded. "You're right."

We left early to start our new careers together.

CHAPTER 10

The security procedure was extensive. We signed documents, took pictures and had new ID cards issued immediately. The consequences for losing a card were severe.

We were escorted by a guard in full police-style kit. His brass nametag said Watkins. He pointed. "Use your card, let's make sure they work."

I swept my card on the elevator panel. The card also had a chip for inserting in door locks. The elevator doors opened.

Watkins went in and said to Corey, "Wave your card under the scanner and press four."

Everything worked. The elevator went up smoothly while Watkins looked at us. He said, "Don't worry, you only get escorted the first time."

Corey and I shared a look.

Watkins led us to the high-countered reception desk. "The new execs are here to see Mister Miller."

The woman was a beautiful older woman, white hair swept back in a bun and wearing expensive glasses. "Have them sit." She typed and said into her headset, "Your morning arrivals are here." She looked up at Watkins, "Take them in."

I had been sitting for less than four seconds. I rose with Corey and we followed Watkins through hallways that bent at angles instead of went straight. The air was running, only warm enough to feel comfortable without a chill. The carpet was a deep Berber, slate gray and clean. The walls were a lighter shade of the carpet with a hint of blue. Ebony-framed artwork lined the walls.

We passed four people on the way and I tried to hide my reaction. Even Corey looked bewilderingly after one of the women: she was dressed in a short skirt with fishnet stockings. But her outfit smelled of money, not trash. I knew I would need to read the handbook for corporate right away. Such wear wasn't

allowed in our branches.

Watkins let us in and then closed the door, his job done.

Chase Miller was a very pleasant-looking balding man with an open face and ready smile. But I saw his eyes with their sharp awareness. This was no mediocre manager. He extended his hand to each of us. "Chase Miller, Chief Human Resources Officer. I'm in line for Chief Operations Officer and you two are going to make that happen. Sit."

We sat in the plush chairs facing his desk.

He sat with practiced ease and adjusted his jacket cuffs. "Not that there's anyone else in line to become COO. It's just a shift to broader responsibilities. When that does happen, though, I hope to have you groomed to assume the vacancies. We'll see how that works out. Corporate is a very different environment from our branches." He leaned back, steepling his fingers. "The branches are run like anything else in the states: rigid, controlled. Corporate-level success is based on adaptability. If you can't transition from rigidity to adaptability, you won't succeed at corporate."

His eyes dropped to his desk where he had two old-fashioned manila folders.

I had wondered if anyone at corporate would even use them anymore.

He used his fingertip to move papers. "You both received glowing performance reports two years in a row."

I felt proud.

He said, "I'm not impressed."

My shoulders itched to droop.

He leaned forward over the desk. "What will impress me is your adaptability. Can you adjust your unusual efforts and make them work in corporate? "

I felt I had to say something. "We will do our best—"

"Of course you will. Or we'll replace you." He did not say it in a threatening

way. He rose. "I have a feeling I chose right. It would have been cleaner to work you up from within headquarters, but I sensed something more. This is an international company. We...don't often adhere to practices one might find expected in America. Our lobbying arm skates the edge of propriety. You're not working for an American company any longer; you're working for power. Come with me and I will show you your new offices."

I followed him down two short corridors. He stopped in front of two doors, metal nameplates already showing our names. Wow, they work fast.

He indicated the doors. "My card works, but use your cards." His smile was welcoming.

I used my card and opened my door. I heard Corey do the same. A walnut-paneled room, less opulent than Miller's, was as large as Bert's office back home. Angled against the window was a Queen Anne office desk. A pair of walnut file cabinets stood against the wall and an empty frame graced the other.

Chase said from the hall, "You can requisition other furniture and also paintings. We leave that choice to you. On your desks you will find your passwords to our computer system. I suggest you change them. If you need anything else, ask Margaret and she'll direct you."

I heard Corey's voice drift from his office. "Thank you."

I said, "Yes, thank you."

We had a connecting door and I opened it. His office was a little smaller than mine, but still large. He was sitting in his chair, looking pale.

He looked at me after Chase had shut his door. "Am I ready for this?"

I went to him and squatted next to his chair. I placed a hand on his thigh and squeezed. "We'll handle this together, Corey. Don't back away from this."

He sighed and wiped his forehead. "Right."

"At first, I thought you were the weaker of the two choices I made a couple of years ago. But you've proved yourself beyond my expectations. You'll come through." I rose. "I'm going to dive into our policies."

He nodded. "I'll do the same."

I left the door open between our offices and sat at my desk. There was a folder placed next to the flat screen monitor. I opened it to find several pages: computer access protocols with password; an outline of expected duties with references to previous procedures; and a list of emails and extensions for inter-office communications. There was also a flow chart for the hierarchy and a calendar of corporate events.

I started the computer.

I phoned my husband. "This is fantastic."

"Yeah?"

"I'll take a couple pictures and send them to you." I sighed happily. "What a promotion."

"Aw, I'm glad for you, Lauren. I wish I could be there."

I gave him my fax number. "Were you able to get out of your lease?"

He sounded uncomfortable. "Well...sort of. Maybe."

"What happened?"

"The leasing company will let me out of it if I pay half the remainder of the lease."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard some places do that. How many months did you have left?"

"Ten months on this extension."

"Hmm...you know, that's only five months and I can pitch in—"

"I'll settle it when the house sells. That might take a few months. No need to cancel it early and then I have nowhere to move my shop."

"Oh...right."

"How do you like the big city?"

I laughed. "Boy, do I have a story to tell you later."

"Ah, okay. A lot of stuff to get used to?"

I was flicking through pages of the corporate handbook as I talked to him. "A bit. I'll call you later tonight and let you know how the first day went."

"Okay, love you."

"I love you, too." I clicked off and then took some pictures. I texted him and attached them.

Me: Check out this office! =)

Reggie: impressive, so happy for you

I put my phone away and put my chin in my palm as I scanned the dress code. Then I read the policy on harassment.

I lunched with Corey in the cafeteria. The food was good – not great, but better than standard cafeteria fare. Rice, steamed veggies, cold veggies, a bin of meat strips for the rice, soups, chicken – all in fairly small quantities. The cook was a heavysset man dressed in white, with a puffy white hat and intelligent eyes. He pointed at me and Corey, right away. "Let me know what you all like and I'll make sure we have enough for you. Email me."

He checked what we chose with pursed lips, gauging whether he had enough left.

We sat at a wooden café-style table. I didn't get one fork into my mouth of the chicken and rice before a handsome man accosted us.

He stuck out his hand. "Paul King, Sales Director. I guess you're going to be hiring my sales staff when I need replacements."

I shook his hand. "Lauren—

"Daniels," he finished for me. "I got the email. And you're Corey Dillon." They shook. "I'll get with you after you've settled in and discuss what kind of person you'll want to look for."

That's my job, Paul. I gave him an eyebrow.

He winked at me and walked to another table.

Corey muttered, "A little brassy."

I sighed. "Salesmen are."

"Shouldn't we be the ones deciding his replacements?"

"Yes, but maybe we'll listen to him anyway."

Corey nodded. "All part of the adaptation thing?"

"Yes, you read my thoughts."

He chuckled. "I wish I could."

What does he mean by that? "I think you have no problem working with me. It's like we finish each other's thoughts."

He tipped his water up and nodded. "You caught the wink?"

I tapped my fork into my rice. "Yes, but did you read the policies?"

"I skimmed them and left it to you. I dove into the procedures."

"The dress code is as lax as we saw. The only requirement is semi-formal to formal and no jeans or khakis. Any dress goes."

"I would think that leads to a lot of sexual harassment."

I finished chewing a bite. "You would think. I think I'll have a chat with Chase about it – pin it down."

I sent him an email after lunch. He responded a half hour later and invited me to his office. I stopped at the connecting door. "I'm going to see Chase about the policies."

Corey was feet up, pen tapping on desk as he read something on his screen. "Sure thing."

I walked back along the halls from memory and stopped at his secretary's desk. "Mister Miller is expecting me?"

She nodded as if it were obvious. She said, "He sent me an email. You don't need to announce yourself unless you haven't been invited. Just go on in."

"Thank you." I went in.

Chase Miller rose from his desk and hitched his slacks. His jacket was thrown over a chair. He came around the desk and rested against it. "Sit."

I did. "I noticed the dress policies are quite a bit more lenient than anything I've been used to..."

He studied me, waiting.

"But the harassment policies don't seem to match the dress code."

He had started nodding when I had mentioned harassment. He took a breath. "KNR operates in ten countries; there's a lot of power there. We demand one thing from our employees: effort. We don't particularly care who beds who or about any silly office gossip."

"But a civil suit—"

"Goes nowhere with our company. Listen to me, Lauren. Power of the kind we wield can make all claims vanish – and probably destroy lives in the process. We care about our product, not whether you can or can't handle your sexuality. Our attorneys haven't worked a harassment case in over two decades. With the power we wield in congress here, with the governments abroad, we have no hesitation in using our attorneys to protect us - and we do that by throwing charges right back at the accuser.

"We expect our employees to be able to act like grown-ups and handle their issues outside of the corporation. It's really that simple. KNR comes first: end of story. Or end of employment. With the number of judges we have in our pockets, we don't need to worry about harassment laws."

Are you serious? I swallowed and nodded. "Okay, I think I see—"

"I hope you do. Is there anything else?"

I knew the tone: end of interview. "No, sir."

His smile melted onto his face. "Remember, adaptation."

I nodded. "Thank you for explaining that to me." I rose to go.

"Oh, you aren't the first we've had to tell." He chuckled. "We're glad to have you on."

CHAPTER 11

I rested on the bed and wriggled my feet. The air felt good on them with the heels off.

Corey came out of the bathroom and smiled at my feet. He sat at the foot of the bed and grabbed my feet. He began massaging them.

I didn't feel that crossed any lines in our sharing a room, so I let him. Besides, it felt heavenly. I closed my eyes and sighed.

Corey said, "Our sales arm has shrunk some over the last twelve years."

"I saw that."

"I guess Stearns and Vargas wanted faster market share via lobbying."

I lifted my head. His eyes were on my thighs, then lifted to my face. I said, "Gordon Stearns was old-fashioned. Had started with KNR in its infancy. Alicia was his most recent protégé."

He stopped massaging my feet, thinking.

I wriggled them in his hands and he went back to massaging them. I twisted my lips to the side. "What if we focused more on sales?"

Corey chuckled. "That might make an enemy of the government relations director."

"Alan?"

"Yep."

I said, "Mister Miller prized adaptability. What if we changed something instead of letting it change us?"

He deadpanned, "I think that's why he took us on. He hinted our hiring was

unusual but he puts trust in us."

I made a face. "Imagine if we could do something to speed individual drugs of ours in NDA."

"Wishful thinking, probably. It's a team of reviewers at the FDA that look at the drug, right?"

"Right. With each team member having a separate area of the drug to review, we'd have to find some way to influence the entire team. Yeah, wishful thinking."

He let go of my feet. "And that leaves lobbying for faster development or increasing sales of existing, proven drugs."

I wasn't sure what his sympathies were, so I ventured slowly, "I've never been a big fan of big-money lobbying our congress..."

His face turned to me slowly. "Neither have I. I wasn't sure where you stood on that."

I laughed with relief. "As an industry, we're looking at an eighty percent failure rate in developing new drugs. So if we push money at a twenty percent success margin, are we really gaining that much? Is it really efficient?"

He nodded, then started shaking his head. "Not efficient at all."

"So let's say we shift the old focus on government lobbying over to sales on already existing drugs."

"Let the other companies squander their money on lobbyists?"

"Well, I wouldn't think they'd let us eliminate it, but shift the weight over to the other side, so to speak."

He frowned. "You want to consult Miller on this?"

I raised my hands in question. "What did he hire us for? We're the ones who decide where human resources get used."

"All right."

"I think I'll have a talk with Paul King tomorrow." I shivered. "Is it cold in here, or what?"

"News said it was going to be zero tonight."

"Brr."

Hours later, in bed, I shivered uncontrollably. I sat up, "What does that say?"

Corey was huddled in his blankets and covers – pulled up to his ears. He put his chin out and said, "Minus eight."

I groaned. "Light a fire or something."

He chuckled. "They said a cold front is moving in faster than expected."

"I heard." I had also heard they now expected it to drop even lower. "This is insane. They give us a sheet, a single, thin blanket and a scratchy cover and none of it holds heat. I can't feel my feet."

Corey got out of bed. He tore off his blanket and cover.

I peered at him incredulously. "What are you doing?"

He flapped the blanket out over me.

I looked at him, astonished. "Don't do that; you'll freeze."

He tossed the cover over me, too. Then he pulled back the bedding. "Move over."

My eyes went large. "What?"

"You want to stay warm, or you want to freeze all night?" He nudged me with his knee.

I scooted away from him in alarm, but that only gave him room to get in. I froze

rigidly.

He scowled at me. "Turn over. We'll be warm like this."

I did so in a jerking move and wide eyes. I felt his arm come over me and his body press against my back. "Uh..."

"Shush."

Who does he think I am? But then I felt the warmth generate between us. I shivered again, and again, but slower now. Okay, maybe this is better.

"Stop shivering; I'm trying to go to sleep."

"Sorry."

He cuddled closer and the warmth blossomed between us. Finally, I relaxed. I can't believe Corey's spooning me! How did I allow this to happen?

Morning was just as cold on the skin of my face outside the covers. I heard the heater running, but even on max, it was ineffectual. Corey breathed softly behind me, arm still draped over me. I felt warm and protected, but I needed to get up. I moved and he awoke with a groan. I said, "I swear that thing's not working." I went over to the unit and placed my hands over it. Warm air blew out, but I also felt cold air radiating off the window through the drapes.

He was leaning up, blinking blearily. "Is it?"

"Yes, but the cold from the window is taking the heat." I danced a little bit back and forth in front of the heater, then turned for the bathroom. "Brr. I'm going to take a hot shower."

His eyes followed my legs as I dashed across the room.

I shut the bathroom door and turned on the heat lamp. I checked the mirror, looking at my t-shirt. I felt a wash of dread flow down my back as I saw this one didn't cover all of my panties. I rubbed my forehead. Great, I gave him a panty-flash. This is embarrassing. It was only Tuesday and I was already in bed with Corey.

The shower relaxed me and warmed me again. I made it hot enough to almost burn. When I came out, he was sitting up, huddled in the blankets and watching TV. He grumped, "Another cold day. Snowstorms expected later. Another front is colliding with this one."

"Fantastic." I adjusted my glasses and said, "You want coffee again?"

"Sure, I'll hurry in the shower." He got out of bed and I averted my gaze away.

On the way to the cafeteria, I stopped by the front desk. "Any news on an opening?"

"A room?" the clerk said.

Duh, no, like a broom closet. You rent out broom closets, right? I cleared my throat. "Yes."

He shook his head, eyes scanning over the screen. "Nothing until Saturday. But you can keep checking back in case there are any sudden departures."

I sighed. "Thank you." I checked the cafeteria before I went in. No Fucking Fletcher. I poured four cups and returned to our room. As I was shutting the door, I heard the shower cut off. How do men do that? Six or seven minute shower? Then I remembered men don't shave things in the shower.

Corey came out ten minutes later, adjusting his tie and tie clip. "Ah, that smells good."

I was dancing in front of the heater.

"You didn't bring a jacket?"

I looked at him with irritation. "Did you?"

He pointed his finger at me, eyebrows pulled up and a dopey grin on his face. "No."

I laughed.

He said, "Maybe we should hit the mall after work. Buy some coats."

"Why didn't you say something yesterday?" I hopped back and forth.

"It wasn't this cold after work." He took up his cup.

I felt infuriated. How can you be so calm and rational while I'm suffering? I swallowed the last of my first cup; I had burnt the tip of my tongue on the first sip.

He squinted at me with concern. "Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

I stomped my foot. "No, I'm cold!"

"Oh, sorry. Why don't we go sit in the cafeteria?"

"If Mister Fletcher is there... No, I'd rather be cold."

He came to me and took me in his arms.

"What are you doing?"

"Keeping you warm. You want me to throw blankets on you and wrinkle your blouse?"

I clutched him and shivered. "Definitely the mall. I'm going to buy a parka."

CHAPTER 12

I emailed Paul King from the warmth of my office. He responded quickly and I was on my way to his office with Corey within a half hour of arrival. I said as we walked out of our offices, "We need to appear like we know salesmen, but are asking his opinion."

"Just be honest with him."

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Just be honest with him."

I wanted to stomp on his foot. "All right, maybe I should trust you."

He stopped and gave me a look that embarrassed me in the hallway. "Maybe?"

I firmed my lips and motioned him to come, hoping nobody was watching.

Paul's office looked more like a command center. Two flat screens mounted on one of the walls showed business news. The other wall held several old fashioned boards with regional sales figures.

Two women were with him, both in severely short miniskirts. One wore stockings, the other did not. The stocking tops were visible beneath her skirt and actually looked glamorous with the outfit. The stockinged one, a brunette, said, "Hi, Lauren. Corey."

I felt embarrassed because I did not know their names.

Corey's eyes were on the brunette. "Hi..."

Is it her brown hair or her stockings you like, hmm?

The two women left after delivering whatever was in their manila folders.

Paul moved them aside. He was a very attractive man with a bold jaw and swept-

back hair. His eyes were keen over a strong nose and his chin had that dimple in the middle many women found attractive. He appeared delighted to see us. He swept an arm. "Sit. Coffee?" He pointed back over his shoulder to a credenza with a coffee machine.

I need one of those.

Corey cleared his throat. "Yes please. Both of us."

I looked askance at him briefly. How do you know I want coffee? I accepted the poured cup. "Thanks."

He sat and adjusted his tie. Then he gave us a look with pursed lips that was braced for the worst. "I really hope you're not here to tell me I have to reduce my staff further."

I opened my mouth and noticed Corey give me a tilted-head look. I knew exactly what that look meant: "Try my honest approach." I squinted my eyes at him. Don't give me that look. I will bite that look off your face. Or kiss it. I looked back to Paul. "Sorry. We were actually...wanting your input."

Corey scratched at his collar.

I felt the heat and warmth rise in my cheeks. "We'd like to hear from you directly what you think of the sales division."

He glanced over at the wall and firmed his lips. Then he leaned back, trying to look indifferent. "Well, as has been said many times over the years, getting drugs to the market can mean bigger bucks on the bottom line. It certainly is in KNR's interests to pursue means that simplify the process—"

I interrupted him. "Paul. We didn't come here to hear a recital of the board's goals. We want to hear from you your opinions of the sales force."

He made a few faces, consideration chief among them and glanced at the wall again. He stood abruptly and retrieved a telescoping pen-pointer from his coat. With a yank, he extended it and stepped to the wall with the displays. "North East region saw flat sales. Central and South Eastern saw a one percent decline. Midwest rose one percent." The pointer tapped each carefully hand-written display. "West is a mixed bag. California was strong, the Pacific North West up

two percent. Utah is negligible. The South West is horrid, down fifteen percent."

I crossed my leg and put my elbows on it. I rested my chin over folded hands.
"Hospital closures in the South West?"

He nodded.

"What about Utah? Why is that negligible?"

He collapsed the pointer and frowned. "Mormons. Stearns didn't like 'em."

"What does that have to do with the bottom line?"

"He refused to hire Mormons to work the region. Utah is still heavily prejudiced against outsiders."

"And he allowed his prejudice to get in the way of the bottom line?"

Paul gave me a helpless look and shrugged. "He was responsible for hiring my staff."

"You don't have any problems with Mormons?"

"Not if they do their job."

Corey spoke up. "What would be your move if you were responsible for hiring your staff?"

Paul dropped into his chair and looked back and forth between us. He took a few seconds to answer. "Increase my staff by at least twenty new sales associates – and I know, that's not going to happen."

"That's not a very enthusiastic approach."

I looked at Corey and raised an eyebrow.

Paul coughed. "Facts are, sales in pharmaceuticals have been shrinking for years. With Obamacare, even faster. I know as well as any other that the trend is downward."

I said, "I don't see why that has to be."

He didn't answer. Instead he stared at me and fiddled with his pen. He twisted it, twirled it, and then poked it onto his blotter. "The problem with expanding is that sales associates need to be lured away from other companies. It's expensive, time-consuming, and often doesn't pay for itself. So we've been focusing on getting product to market."

Corey said, "You headhunt for your staff?"

"Of course."

I asked, "Why?"

He dropped his pen and sat back. "You want the hungry. The best. Those who are driven. That means you want your competitor's associates."

I turned my head slightly to look at him more out of my left eye. "Who says someone who is already working is hungry?"

He tossed up his hands. "No one wants to hire unemployed sales associates. They're failures."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Of course, or they wouldn't be unemployed."

Corey said, "Who's your star sales associate?"

I grimaced, not wanting to be interrupted.

Paul said, "Janine Taylor, Pacific North West. None better."

Corey gestured with his hand. "Let's say Bayer buys out KNR—"

He laughed. "Not going to happen."

"Let's just say it does. Bayer fires the entire sales staff in the merger. Does that make Janine a failure?"

Paul frowned, staring at him now instead of me. "Are you seriously suggesting putting an ad in the paper?"

I realized Corey had laid a trap for Paul and I added to it. "And the internet. Where else do you find hungry associates desperate to show they can still sell product?"

He made a face, lifted his eyebrows and comprehension spread across his features. "Well..."

I said, "Would you have any problem integrating a Mormon associate if we were to find one?"

"Of course not."

I straightened in my chair, uncrossing my leg. I decided a more formal approach at this time would have the greatest effect. "Mister King, we would appreciate if you would email us with target areas where you feel extra associates would impact sales."

He looked surprised. "You're not just going to throw me staff?"

"Maybe that's how it worked in the past, but we'd rather draw new associates from areas with which they're familiar."

A stunned smile lightly touched his lips. He nodded slowly. "I'll send you an email within the hour."

The mall was not packed, considering all the hotels, motels, and streets were. I said, "I don't know if I want to get out of the car."

Corey chuckled. "This has a great heater. I figured Mercedes would be more about air conditioning."

"Germans get snow, too."

He grunted. "It'll be warm inside. We can make a run for it."

I giggled, then shook. "Brr."

"Come on." He opened the door, letting out all the heat.

I squawked and shut off the car. I got out fast and fumbled the fob to lock the doors. Then I hurried around to where he beckoned.

He took my hand and trotted with me as our breaths made steam trails out of our mouths.

"Oh my gosh. Too cold." It was minus four.

"We better get used to it."

"Yeah, s-sure, with proper w-winter clothing."

The warmth of the mall buffeted us instantly once we were passed the double entry. I almost melted.

Corey grinned at me. "Nice, huh?"

"I can sleep in here."

"You want to split up and meet back?"

"That sounds faster. Where do you want to meet?"

He pointed to a center sitting area that surrounded plants and an ugly sculpture that seemed awfully out of place. "There's good."

I left him, walking and looking at the stores. But I wasn't window shopping; I had a mission. Coat, boots, warm blanket, pajamas...

I found what I needed at Macy's. A heavy black wool overcoat went into a large carry bag with a wool blanket and snow boots. I skipped the pajamas; they were all polyester and ugly with gaudy colors and characters.

Lugging my bags, I started to pass a Victoria's Secret store heading back to the meeting place. I paused, then went in. I drifted to the stockings area and began looking.

A suspicious sales associate a foot shorter than me with enormous breasts watched everything I did with squinted eyes.

What the fuck is your problem. Can't you see I'm a buying customer and not a

thieving one? I tried to consider the stockings. Corey had been impressed by the brunette's lacy ones earlier that morning. I wonder if I could find something a little classier. Would he notice? Would anyone notice?

"Can I help you?" the girl's voice was accusatory.

I turned on her and considered her. Can't Victoria's Secret hire more pleasant associates? "I'm looking for stockings."

The girl's name-tag was stamped Jessica. She looked down at my legs with an obvious look of distaste and started to shake her head.

I turned away from her. She's just a jealous wage-slave. Don't fall to her level. I heard a sniff of contempt behind me, but I ignored that, too. I selected a stocking style that my eyes kept considering. I no sooner had it in my hand when it was snatched out.

Jessica said airily, "I can ring that up for you."

I looked at my empty hand and blinked. I shook my head as I grabbed two more of the same size. I followed Jessica who hadn't seen me take the other two.

She went behind the counter and didn't even look at me. She was looking down her nose at the counter. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"Yes, these, too." I tossed the two packages up on the counter.

She gave me the most hateful scowl and grabbed them.

The other associates in the place did not seem rude. Why did I get the bitchy one?

I met Corey at the meeting place. He was sitting back, a gun magazine in hand. Despite his slender build, he looked more man than any of the others I had seen in the mall. I said, "Let's get out of here before this awful music gets stuck in my head."

He hadn't even noticed me and was surprised. "Oh, hey."

"Did I take too long?"

"I didn't know we were going to be here for three hours." His eyes were playful.

"Shut up; I was only shopping for like forty-five minutes."

"Why don't you put on your jacket?"

"Mmm, yeah." I heaved the bags around and produced the coat.

"Ooo, nice."

I shrugged into it as he picked up my other bags. I frowned. "Hey."

He gave me a pained look. "I can help." He looked down. "A blanket? I didn't keep you warm enough?"

A wave of warmth rushed up my insides and I blushed. "Well, do you really think we should be sharing a bed?"

He looked at me curiously. "I didn't find the experience unpleasant..."

I looked him in the eyes to deliver something appropriate, but I couldn't. Instead, I trembled. It wasn't unpleasant? No, it really wasn't, was it? I swallowed.

"Well...it still might...be cold..." I couldn't believe I was saying it. My love for Reggie pulsed strong in my heart, but the sudden weightless sensation I got looking at Corey felt exciting and intimate.

CHAPTER 13

I got out of my blouse while Corey was in the bathroom. I shrugged into my t-shirt. I was in the process of unbuttoning my skirt when he came out. I froze. What do I do? Go into the bathroom to remove my skirt? He's already seen my legs. I finished unbuttoning it and removed it. I bent down to get my feet out of it and felt his eyes on me. Part of me wanted to scold him. Another part of me heated dramatically with satisfaction. He really thinks I'm attractive? Me? Forty-one next month?

He was sitting on his own bed, then shifted around to get in.

I had spread the wool blanket onto mine under the hotel cover when we had arrived. Still, I felt a little disappointed. I tugged down my t-shirt to cover my panties and went to the bathroom. I removed my glasses and washed my face, removing the light make-up I applied every morning.

When I came out, he was reading.

I moved in between the beds and folded back my covers, wondering if he was looking at me behind my back. I half expected a touch. But I got into bed feeling nothing. Aggravation coursed lightly through me and my clit began heating. I wish Reggie was here. I turned over and tried to squeeze my thighs to relieve the building pressure. It was still cold under the sheets and I tossed again, shivering. It really did feel nice having him sleep against me last night. I opened my mouth and froze. I really shouldn't; we're married. I shook myself. "It's still cold."

His head came up and magazine went down. "We can fix that." He got up.

My heart pounded in my ears as he climbed in next to me. I didn't roll over; I wasn't sure I could move. He hesitated only a second, then moved his arm over me. His knee bent and rested over mine. A burning reaction raced up my legs, body, and into my throat. Fire built in my clit and the pressure began squirming and twisting. I tried to control my breathing, but I was panting.

He murmured, "You smell good." His face was pressed against my head and the heat of his breath vibrated through my ear and down my chest. My nipples

hardened painfully and my hips jerked upward. I gasped.

He jerked, startled, and began pulling his arm back from across me.

I grabbed his hand and pulled, feeling the room swirl around me. I pushed his hand down between my thighs and onto my panties.

His arm tensed.

I pressed his fingers down onto my clit and my hips jerked upward without any thought or control of my own.

His arm relaxed and I heard him begin to breathe faster. His fingers began moving in little circles, spreading that heat and ache around just as I needed it. He moved his hand more and then away.

I gripped his forearm, but he was only repositioning his hand. His fingers slipped down my panties and over my clit. I moaned loudly, arching my hips up. I trembled, feeling his fingers slowly move back and forth over my pussy. Hardness registered against my hip. What does he have? Is it nice? But I'm married and love my husband. But would it be so bad if I felt it? Once? Just a little touch? No one has to know. I reached over and tore at his boxers with scrabbling fingers.

He shifted a little.

My hand went down his boxers and I felt the touch of very warm and hard flesh. He's really excited for me? That only served to pour gasoline on my fire. I gripped him and stroked as best I could. He felt a little smaller than my husband, but it still felt great to have man-flesh in my hand once again; I so desperately needed it. My hips pumped as his fingers played along my folds and dipped inside me. My lips vibrated with the passage of his fingers and I gasped and groaned with anticipation.

Corey moaned with his own excitement and he jerked away from me. But he wasn't leaving; he was heading under the covers. I felt him grab my panties and yank them down. The heat redoubled, and I let him. He scooted down under the covers and between my legs. I spread them willingly for his face. His tongue licked over my clit, finding it and teasing it as I lost all control.

I grabbed his head and moaned high with relief. His wet tongue trailed up and down and over, heightening and agitating the heat and ache. My hips rotated shamelessly and my fingers clawed in his hair. I wanted more. I needed more. Waves of delicious anticipation rolled up me and sent zapping pulses to my nipples. I moaned louder, feeling the build of something so needed.

Just as I was on the verge of climax, his tongue left. He was groaning and moving up my body. "Lauren..." His head came out of the covers near mine, his hands slid up and hooked my t-shirt in the web of his thumbs, lifting it. I felt the press of his cock against my pussy.

I moaned and squirmed as his tongue brushed over my exposed nipples, his stubble scraping them after and sending tormenting twists back down to my tortured pussy.

With a single thrust, he went from outside to in, filling my hole with his manhood. No, it wasn't as big as my husband's, but it felt right and good right now. Exactly what I needed and right where I needed it. I held my breath, feeling my pussy stretch enough to accommodate him. It pushed the ache away and I pulled on him until he was mashing his pubic bone against my clit. I felt his balls pressed against my lower pussy lips and his shaft flex within me.

I slowly let out a groan, though I did not release his small butt. I kept pulling, just savoring the feel of a man in my needy pussy. This can't be bad. Oh, but it is. I'm married, I can't be doing this. Oh, Corey. Move a little, let me know what it feels like before I have to put a stop to this...

He moved, his body trembling above mine and his breath coming in gasps. He was super-excited and it sent thrills through me that made me feel happy. His hips moved and his cock slid back and forth, in and out of me. It felt fantastic. Yes, just a little more.

He leaned up and angled his hips, driving his cock as deep as he could. "Oh, Lauren, you feel fantastic."

I moaned, biting my lip. I needed a little more. I raised my legs and circled them over his small waist. I pulled.

He obliged and began thrusting his cock into me. My pussy welcomed it hungrily, twisting tighter. I had been on the edge before he had stopped licking

me. I was quickly thrust close to the edge again. He whispered, "You're so beautiful."

I couldn't take it. His words resonated deep and dislodged the dam holding back my relief. I cried out, thrusting my hips up at him like a teenager in heat. Explosive bursts radiated out from my pussy, sending heat and release like tidal waves through me. My orgasm excited him and he pumped harder, his pubic bone mashing my electrified clit and coaxing a more dramatic release from my climax.

His body tensed over mine and he panted louder, his cock moving faster. Then I felt the hot bursts inside of my pussy, making me feel hot and wet. He groaned loudly and held it inside as it flexed and shot his cum into me.

I gasped with relief, feeling happy that my friend and associate had found his own happiness, too. I felt complete. He fell asleep on me, in me, and in my arms as my body tingled and pulsed with satisfaction.

CHAPTER 14

I wore the stockings the next day with one of my standard business skirts. The lacy tops were covered when I stood, but showed when I sat, as I discovered in the car.

Corey's eyes went wide and he licked his lips.

I tried to keep a smile off my face. So it is the stockings.

We worked together on the regionals Paul had sent us. I had him place paper ads in the biggest cities and several internet ads as well. I handled contacting universities to include us in job placement. I didn't have high hopes for that, but Bachelor's Degrees in Sales were still offered and available.

I filed my summary report at the end of the day with general reference to our work in seeking staff additions. Chase Miller didn't bother us.

Throughout the day, Corey would stop and stare at me with a hunger in his eyes. I knew I had to do something. What had happened last night was great and all, but it wasn't something either of us needed. We were both happily married. Or so I thought.

He came into my office as I was sending my daily report. I was sitting with one leg over the other, stockings exposed. His eyes locked onto my stockings and didn't leave.

I glanced to the door. "Close the door."

He did, a curious look on his face.

I motioned to a chair.

He pulled it around and sat next to me, head tilted in question.

"We can't pretend we aren't married."

He appeared to chew on the side of his mouth. "No."

"Look, you're a friend to me, Corey. But I love my husband." My eyes shot to the frame on my desk; I had brought it with me.

A hurt look came over his face, but his words that went with it weren't what I expected. "I don't want to hurt that."

"What about Leane?"

He straightened defensively. "I don't want to hurt my wife, either."

"We can't just go on...like we did last night."

His face grew serious. "And why not? You said yourself, we're friends. I feel that, too. I feel a bond of friendship with you strong enough that I'd do something far out of the norm and keep you warm at night. I feel enough of a friend to help you and each other get through this period of loneliness."

"I'm not lonely."

He rubbed his forehead. "Maybe that's not the right description. I just mean we both miss our spouses. I love my Leane and I miss her."

"I miss my husband, too."

"There you have it. We can support each other until we can be with them again."

I uncrossed my legs. "I don't know that's a good idea."

His eyes dropped down and his hunger made me warm. Very warm. "Is it wrong for us to be friends?"

"Of course not—"

"Then what is so wrong about a friend helping a friend? I want to help you, Lauren."

I trembled, feeling my body betraying me. He got up, stepping behind me. His hands rested on my shoulders and sent spasms of seductive intent down my arms. His fingers kneaded, then slid down over my breasts under my blouse.

He whispered into my ear, "I want you." His words sent shivers showering through me.

I got up, disengaging myself from his hands. "Not here."

We drove back to the hotel, his fingers teasing my thigh the whole way. I was wet by the time we arrived and I didn't even feel the cold as I walked in. I didn't bother asking the desk again about a room; it was only Wednesday. For some reason, I felt no rush to check until Saturday. Maybe even Sunday.

Our room was cold and I turned up the heater. He spun me around and kissed me. Perhaps our coupling the previous night had been more impersonal and meant for friends, but this kiss was not impersonal. I melted faster than an ice cube in a blast furnace. I kissed him back, exploring my friend for the first time in an intimate way. Our tongues meshed and fought gently, but with an underlying desperation that knew it was forbidden.

I allowed myself to be pushed down onto the bed. His hands worked quickly, unbuttoning my blouse carefully. He helped me out of it. Then he removed my skirt and panties. He shed his clothes next and I watched him uncover what I hadn't seen last night. When he was naked, I admired my friend. He stood skinny, but his cock hung engorged and large for his shape and size. Still, he was smaller than my husband, but that was okay.

He was erect and stroking himself while looking at my pussy. I felt an enormous wave of satisfaction and surprise: seeing him so openly desiring me made me even wetter.

I reached for him. "Don't tease me."

He climbed between my legs and my pussy parted for his excitement. I groaned with relief as his now familiar cock slid into me. He smiled down at me. "Does that feel good?"

"Yes."

He began moving. "You like this?"

His moving hardness felt perfect. "Yes...fuck me."

"But, you're married," he said in a snarky tone.

I clawed at his back. "Fuck my married pussy. Use it, Corey. I want to feel your married dick in me." I felt desperate and delirious.

He chuckled as if holding some great secret, then made my annoyance go away by kissing me. I yielded myself to him, letting him take control and move us together into intimacy.

February 10, 2016

Me: Any news from the realtor?

Reggie: nothing yet

Reggie: showed the house eight times already

Me: Is our asking price too high?

Reggie: it's a steal

Me: I miss you a lot.

Reggie: me too babe

Me: Maybe you could come up for a weekend?

Reggie: a good possibility

I only knew I really needed my husband. This living apart was stupid. With my birthday in four days, I was feeling neglected. I looked around the two rooms of my hotel room and felt the extra loneliness.

Me: This weekend? It's my birthday.

Reggie: lol I was planning to

I coughed in irritation.

Me: Jerk.

Reggie: come on, I would never forget

Reggie: just wanted it to be a surprise

There was a knock at the door.

Me: Corey's here, see you

Reggie: love you

I opened the door.

His smile felt warm in the cool of the air. "You ready?"

I nodded and went out.

The last month had been a whirlwind of business both in and out of work. Human Resources executive by day, close friend by night. I kept Corey at the necessary distance, even getting my own room when one of the two-rooms became available. But we definitely did not stop colliding with each other in desperate couplings that left us both drained and content, if only temporarily.

Driving to work, I said, "Reggie will be in this weekend."

He looked surprised. "Oh yeah? Leane, too. We're going to look for a place together. All the packing is done and she's ready to move."

I felt good for him in a way – he didn't have a home to sell. "Still no word for us on a buyer."

He tsked.

I stated the obvious. "Chase will be seeing that first report in less than an hour."

"Any bets on whether we're called in or not?"

"None, it's guaranteed."

He chuckled. "Think he notices small details like that?"

I gave him a level look. "I know he does."

"Why do I feel our jobs are on the line?"

"Because they are. If we don't produce results, they'll replace us. I just wonder if we're producing them fast enough to meet—"

He finished for me, "Or exceed expectations."

It was almost two hours into our day when my phone burred. I picked up. "Lauren Daniels."

"Lauren? Chase. You and Corey meet me in my office." He clicked off.

I felt a little chill. I rose and looked through the dividing door. "Corey, that was Miller. We're on."

He got up and grabbed his jacket. He had bought some new suits and it showed. "Let's do it." He straightened his cuffs.

I picked up the manila folder and walked out with him into the hall. We walked side-by-side moving one way or the other around other people. I was used to the dress code by now, the shock having long since worn off. I even had shorter skirts – much to Corey's delight. But not much else on me changed.

We entered Chase's office. The man was tapping his cheek with a finger, looking at his computer screen. "Sit."

I held the folder primly in my hands as I did. We waited.

He finally turned those intense and intelligent eyes towards us. "I couldn't help but notice an uptick in sales in the Western Division – in Utah." He studied both of us for a few seconds. "Our human resource efforts have been in the area of lobbying – getting our product to market sooner."

Corey said nothing, and I still waited.

He sat back and grabbed up his pen. "It's hard to say you've failed to produce

results, but are these the results we want?"

I felt the opening. "The lobbying division outnumbers our sales staff three to one. More lobbyists aren't going to speed any of our drugs any faster—"

"But legislation can."

"Understood, sir, but with all of the competitors pursuing the same goal, we have an army of lobbyists and still with only a twenty percent chance of any one drug benefiting from all of that expense."

He pursed his lips. "One successful drug is billions—"

"And all of our existing drugs are a wealth to be mined."

All of us fell silent.

He sighed. "I appreciate your view and I'm aware we could increase sales. It is a good, short term move. But our focus must be on getting drugs to market faster."

"I agree, sir, but what is a hundred more lobbyists going to accomplish on that front when there are already multiple thousands? Is the expense worth it if legislation fails? Whereas pushing our existing and proven line immediately impacts the bottom line."

"How much did you have to pay to bring in your new associates? Luring isn't cheap."

"We hired outright."

"What?"

"The Utah blip you see was a fresh hire. He had been out of work for a year."

"It isn't done this way—"

"We were hired for results. When you see next month's report, I think you'll see the efficiency of pushing our existing line. Right to the bottom line."

He sighed heavier, but nodded. He pinched the bridge of his nose and kept nodding. "Yes, I happen to agree with you." Then he shook his head. "You're

going to embarrass me before the board, you know."

"Sir?"

"First, you swing our focus back to sales. It's an old fashioned idea. Second, you hire someone off the street?"

"Paul told us he desired hungry salesmen."

Chase grunted.

"How hungry can you be if companies keep headhunting you? I've found the hungriest of workers are those who fell out of the workplace due to mergers and acquisitions. What happened to those stars? Corey and I want to find them."

He blew out a breath and reluctantly nodded. "I'll have to find some way to explain this in some kind of general way. Maybe deflect specifics until later." He directed a stare at me. "You better hope your shift produces some impressive results by the end of the quarter."

I sat straight, feeling it with every fiber of my being. "We're confident they will, sir."

He chuckled. "Relax, Lauren. Everyone likes you. This change is just unexpected is all."

I stayed quiet.

"I understand it's your birthday this Sunday?"

"Yes."

"Forty one?"

"Yes."

"Join me for cocktails Sunday afternoon. I'll email you the country club details. If it were warmer, I'd invite you for a round of golf." His smile was sincere.

Feeling relieved at being past the business, I felt honored that my immediate boss was personable enough to know my birthday. "Thank you..."

He winked. "The pleasure will be mine and we won't talk business, though I might like to hear about where you came from. I'm wondering how our Austin installation produced such an unusual thinker."

The meeting was at an end.

CHAPTER 15

I spent Saturday alone until dinnertime. Corey and Leane invited me to a steak dinner. They sat together and Corey looked no different than he had at either of the New Year's functions we had shared. He didn't sneak looks at me, she didn't scowl, and he was very obviously pleased to be with his wife.

I breathed easier, feeling good that he was keeping things as straight as I was. I said to Leane, "Did you two find anything?"

She looked embarrassed. "We looked at some condos to rent..."

I felt bad for her; she was trying to cover that a couple of Corey's paychecks were not yet enough to buy a place. "Renting is easier to transition. We'll be doing the same if our house ever sells."

"We were just renting."

"Lucky for you. Easier to pick up and move. Reggie is still trying to sell our place."

I could tell that made her feel better. She ventured a smile. "The movers come Monday, then there's a week delay in arrival. But I have some separate things packed and I'll be here Tuesday."

The waiter came and interrupted us.

After he left, Leane reached over and touched me. "Thank you for everything." Her eyes looked watery. "This has been such a wonderful step up for Corey. I feel like we escaped the collapsing building in the nick of time."

"Don't thank me. Thank your husband. He persevered and showed me he still had the drive and fire to work. Many people just give up."

She shook her head. "I can't imagine anyone giving up."

I raised my eyebrows at her. "In this business climate? Over ninety million

workers have dropped off the employment rolls—"

She looked confused. "Where did you hear that?"

"Bureau of Labor Statistics. The government conveniently doesn't count them anymore because they've been out of work for so long. So it makes the job losses look small and the employment picture look rosy."

"What do people do?"

I shook my head, not wanting to think of it. "Welfare, if they can get it. Then they end up sleeping in their cars while looking for work. Eventually, if they can't find anything, they sell their cars to eat and go homeless."

Corey gave me a "don't ruin the night" look.

Leane looked around guiltily.

I sighed quietly. "You see a lot when looking over applications. People try to hide things, but you get to know what to look for. Anyway, I appreciate you thanking me, but really, your husband deserves all the credit."

She laughed a little. "But you hired him."

I said softly, "He impressed me by who he was, not by the words I read on the application. We're human, too."

Her eyes got bright and she covered her mouth. "I didn't mean—"

I was laughing. "If you apologize, I'm going to fall over."

Her smile was appreciative. "Corey's lucky to have a friend like you."

"And fortunate to have such a lovely and supporting wife." I squeezed her hand.

The dinner was pleasant with enjoyable company. I felt good around Leane and happy they had each other. Another day and obstacle down and overcome. I went back to my hotel feeling secure and satisfied. Life was going exactly where it should be going.

I drove to the country club Sunday after lunch. Reggie wasn't due in for another five hours. He was going to stay the night and drive back in the morning.

I entered the sprawling building and approached the desk. "Chase Miller?"

The woman pursed her lips, nodded, and pointed. "In the lounge, to the right of the big plant."

"Thank you."

The clubhouse was bursting with crystal and fancy decorations that left little doubt that this was where the money was. It was even warm inside. I quailed to think of their utility bill.

Chase rose from his small table. He took both of my hands, drawing me in for a cheek kiss. "There's the birthday girl." He looked towards one of the cocktail waitresses and beckoned.

I sat beside him in the curved half-booth. There was no chair.

"What are you having, Lauren?" His face was relaxed and friendly.

"Strawberry margarita, please?"

"Another martini for me."

The waitress swirled around and pranced away.

He squeezed my arm. "So, what are your plans for your birthday?"

He was a handsome man for being older. He was very fit in that golfer style and his balding head made him look distinguished. There was a power to his intense eyes that made many people at corporate weak. He was a man who knew what he wanted and went for it. I tilted my head, feeling ashamed of having nothing to do on my special day. "My husband will be coming in later. We're going to have dinner."

"Wonderful. I so enjoy people who value families. Children?" He said it doubtfully.

"None..."

"Uh oh," he said gently. "I detect a story there."

I pursed my lips, still feeling the loss after all these years. "Miscarriage."

He made a sorrowful sound and shook his head. His hand on my arm squeezed. "I am so sorry to hear that."

The waitress brought our drinks.

I dutifully waited for him to pick up his glass. Then I drank from mine. It was exceptionally good, and on the strong side.

He tilted his head. "What does your husband do?"

"He's a finish carpenter – custom work."

He nodded, his eyes flashing at something I wasn't privy to. "A solid occupation. Much more meaningful than business figures."

I wasn't sure what he meant.

He said, "But figures are where the power is." He let go of my arm and settled back from me a little to look at me more fully. "Did you know Moto expressed interest in the sales results?"

Hideo Moto was our Chief Financial Officer. I said, "He was?"

He made a supportive sound.

I knew that if anybody liked my results, it should be Moto.

"But I think you already expected that."

I smiled sheepishly and took another drink.

He said, "Maybe pursuing our existing lines will help carry us through Obamacare's implosion."

He was right, I could see it everywhere: providers leaving the program in droves.

The entire Act was going to collapse under its own impossible weight. "Maybe we'll be in a good position to capture some market share and expand our base."

"And leave the lobbyist gamble to other companies?"

I nodded.

He took a drink and made a considering face at me. "The more I think about your plan, the more I am liking it. But let's not talk business. I promised I wouldn't."

"That's all right."

"No, it's not. But I wanted you to know about Moto." He shifted away and signaled the waitress. He turned to me. "Do you like deep fried stuffed peppers?"

"Love them."

He looked up at the waitress. "One order, please, and refresh our drinks?" He turned to me and placed his hand back on my arm. "So, tell me about Austin and the experiences of being a Human Resources Manager there."

I was trashed. Not really bad, but I had a third drink. At the end of the little meeting, Chase had to drive me back to my hotel in my own car. He mentioned taking a taxi. His intensity and charisma was such that I was drawn into our conversation as if with a long-known intimate friend.

He was genuinely entertained by my stories and I was amazed at some of his - especially the one about hiring out a madam in DC to ply two recalcitrant senators with sexual favors. The bill had failed to pass, but it was close.

I fumbled my key-card and entered my hotel room. Chase followed me in. I stood in the dark, not sure what to do. The room swayed a little.

He came close, gently holding my upper arms. "Are you going to be all right?"

I nodded, half-laughing. "Oh, sure. I just can't handle three drinks very well. Make me giggle. But I'll be okay in, oh, 'bout an hour..." I trailed off – his

intense eyes were burrowing into mine.

"You're a very attractive woman, Lauren."

My knees melted. With three drinks I was a sucker for anything a man said, especially one as distinguished and handsome as Chase Miller. "I... Thank you..."

He pulled me fiercely and gave me the most explosive kiss, James T. Kirk-style from the old Star Trek series. I felt as if I were a yeoman in a miniskirt with a beehive hairdo, pliant in the strong captain's hands. My chest heaved and I panted after the kiss. I looked up into his eyes and saw his hunger.

I became wet in an instant. Damn these margaritas.

He moved back up against the ottoman. His hand deftly unhooked my skirt and yanked it down. I stepped out of them and felt the blossoming warmth within me. He dropped his slacks with practiced moves, his eyes burning into mine.

I gasped. His cock was enormous. Thick and heavy, it was a couple of inches bigger than my husband's. I gaped.

He spun me and pushed me down over the ottoman. I felt the pressure from behind, and then my pussy was splitting and stretching open, admitting the thick cock of this older man. I was so wet, he had no trouble. I felt the amazing thickness invading me fast. I cried out low when his shaft filled me. I had never, ever felt so full. I didn't think I could move.

But Chase sure did. He thrust with more energy than I might have imagined from such a calm and peaceful man. His cock drove into me so fully and completely that my head flopped as he fucked me. His hand pulled on my shoulder as he pumped me from behind. I felt like my insides were being pulled in and out with the sliding of his pole. I was delirious with pleasure.

He pulled out and flipped me over. He lifted my legs and placed that veiny shaft back at my pussy. "You're amazing, Lauren. Absolutely amazing." He shoved hard, driving the breath out of me as he dropped down and pushed it all the way in. His hips rose and fell as I gasped out weakly. My hips worked with his and his thick shaft drove into me deep, over and over. I loved it.

His hips smashed down into mine with solid slaps as my pussy received the biggest fucking it had ever taken. His heavy balls slapped loudly against my ass and I grunted with each thrust. My eyes shut to stop the spinning of the room and I drifted away on waves of lust. That burning fire in me burned brighter and tensed me with the build of its force. The slapping sound of our fucking was what did it. It was so wet and forceful that I felt tipped over in a rush of bursting joy. My pussy clamped on him as I squealed at the force of my orgasm.

He grunted faster, driving down into me with more force.

Oh my god, I'm going to die if he doesn't stop. This is too much, too good, too dirty. I was being manhandled as if I were a little doll and I loved it. Finally, I felt his cock expand inside me. Powerful bursts melted my insides and left his cum so far in me I didn't know if it would ever come out.

He panted over me and stroked my hair back out of my eyes. "Simply amazing. No, not simple. Something more complex, like a fantastic whine. Or harder like a great whisky." He pulled out slowly. "Best to act like this never happened." He winked.

I knew he was married, and I knew from his previous warning that the company didn't care who bedded who. As long as it was all kept out of work. I put my hand on my forehead, feeling the deliriously delicious aftereffects of great sex. "Wow..."

CHAPTER 16

I was showered, refreshed, and ready when Reggie called.

"I'm pulling in now."

I smiled happily. "I'll be in the lobby." I clicked off. I felt much better now that I knew my husband was here. I met him in the lobby, colliding with him into a big hug. He carried a shopping bag with handles.

"Happy birthday, love." He handed me the bag.

I glanced around, not wanting to see Mister Fletcher, but not expecting to, either. "Let's go up to my room."

His arm was around my waist as we walked, and I felt bonded again for the first time in a month. I felt him squeeze. "I missed you."

I laughed lightly. "And I missed you. Very much. It's lonely sleeping alone." That was true, but I left out the part about sleeping next to Corey; I just couldn't imagine Reggie understanding.

"Is Corey still in the hotel?"

"Until Tuesday or so."

"At least you know somebody here, then."

I didn't want to talk about that: dangerous territory. Not just the sleeping, but that would lead to remembering the many times over the last month we had fucked to relieve our mutual loneliness. I wanted this to be special for me and my husband. I let us into my room. "Are you hungry?"

"Not at all. More anxious to be with you than out rubbing elbows with other eaters." He smiled slyly.

I looked in the bag. There were a few packed things I had asked, but nestled

amongst them was a gift. My heart did a skip or two in excitement. "What did you get me?" It's not that I expected an answer, I was asking to acknowledge his offer.

"Just open it." He sat back on the couch in a familiar way that made me want to run and jump into his lap.

I carefully tore the wrapping open and revealed a low jewelry box. I flipped the lid open and gazed at the stunning match to my necklace in bracelet form. I breathed, "A tennis bracelet."

"That's what the jeweler called it, too. Though I can't imagine swinging a racket around wearing that."

I giggled. "It's just a term. You don't wear these for tennis." I lifted the heavy metal out. Platinum with studded deep red rubies. It must have cost a fortune. "You spent way too much—"

"Shut up. I wanted to and I did. I love you." His growling excuse was one of the things I so loved about him.

I sat on his lap and hugged him. My first touch of lips to his brought back all the familiarity and love that I had been keeping in check this past month. I melted into his kiss, swept away with a joyous remembrance of what we had. With Corey, it was a friendship thing; it was just sex. With Chase, that had been a drunken fling of lust. My pussy being pounded and pummeled was what it needed. But there was no love in either of those relationships. Certainly not even friendship with my boss. But here in my husband's arms was what made me whole.

He lifted me and carried me to the bed in the other room. "This really is a nice room."

I didn't bother answering; I didn't care. He was tearing off his clothes and I was tearing off mine. He started to get his face between my legs and I clenched. What if he tastes Chase in there? I took a shower, but the man came a lot. I pulled on him. "No, not now. I don't want to be teased; I want you in me."

He didn't argue and the hunger in his eyes warmed me dramatically. The touch of his cock to my pussy sent an electric tingle dancing and dazzling its way up my

pussy, spine, and neck. My lips parted and I whimpered with relief as that so very familiar cock pushed into and filled me with that perfection that could only come from my husband. He inserted fully, filling me with memory, comfort, and love.

I clutched him tightly, now wanting him to move. Not wanting him to leave. "Oh...how I've missed you..." And I did. I wanted to cry as my body felt the perfection that was my husband. His cock was the right length and thickness – the perfect match to my pussy. Corey's was smaller, but he used it like a masseuse – easing my tension and loneliness away with deft care. Corey was like a backrub. Chase had been brutal and intimate, like a great backscratch that was felt all the way down to the shivering soles of my feet. But with my husband, I felt all the connection, love, and shared intimacy that had always been ours. With Reggie, I was complete; the other two could not compete.

My husband panted above me. "I love you Lauren. It's been torture without you."

"Make love to me..." I said, and meant it. Neither Corey nor Chase could give me this.

Two months passed. Reggie finally got the house sold and we were in a rented condo. The house hunt went slowly – we didn't want to rush. He opened a shop in town though he didn't have any work to do at first. He put his cards out at hardware stores and DIY centers. He hooked a few rough carpentry jobs as he called them and settled in to rebuild his business.

My income more than made up for his temporary loss.

Corey and I continued our efforts in rebuilding the sales force. The numbers were excellent. We also continued being close friends, though that now required doing things in my office after hours. I told my husband Wednesdays were probably always going to be late as we strategized over the previous week's figures.

Chase left me alone. He didn't even wink, for which I was grateful.

Corey and I were called into Chase's new office. We walked together, side-by-side, hooked together in friendship as well as business. We walked easily, not

stiffly, and it felt good having Corey at my side.

Chase was looking out his new window. He had made Chief Operations Officer, mainly because of mine and Corey's success. The man turned, a warm smile on his face. "I suppose I have you to thank for my promotion, but there was never any doubt. You did, however sweeten the deal." He sat and waved to chairs. "Unfortunately, a few of the board members are disappointed at the shift from lobbying to sales. The point keeps coming up that we could make a billion on one new drug whereas we're only getting a couple hundred million pushing new sales."

I didn't know what to say about that. Who was going to complain about a couple hundred million?

Corey gave me a look.

Chase ignored my silence and Corey's gesture. "Next month is the corporate annual in the Virgin Islands. You have one more report to impress the board." There was something he left unsaid. He appeared to switch gears. He glanced at the door and motioned. "Corey, would you shut that, please?"

"Of course." He was up with energy and shut the door.

Chase pursed his lips, looking between me and Corey. "It has come to my attention that there's more between you two in your good working relationship. In fact, it's an excellent working relationship. Remember, though, my warning about keeping your personal lives separate from your duties here at KNR. Our attorneys are always looking for a good fight. A sexual scandal would have them chewing on the both of you like dogs on a meat scrap."

I paled. How did he know?

He rose from his desk and came around it. He leaned back against his desk and regarded us up close. "But something tells me I don't have to worry about that at all with you two, and that makes me happy. That means you're fitting right into the corporate structure. That also eases my mind about what happened on your birthday, Lauren."

Corey glanced at me with question in his eyes.

I was frozen.

Chase smiled, nodding slightly. "In fact, I'm very looking forward to chatting with you both at the annual."

I knew the annual was employees only. None of our spouses would be there. I licked my lips and swallowed. What does he have in store?

But Chase wasn't telling. "In the meantime, keep up the effort both at work and in your personal lives." He indicated the door.

CHAPTER 17

I rode my husband, feeling the stress of the day draining away. It was wonderful being with him again; the separation stuff was bullshit.

He grinned at me. "Going to miss me next week?"

The Virgin Islands trip.

I kept moving. "Yes."

"All alone on vacation with your co-workers. I don't know..."

I panicked. Is it written all over my face? Does he know about Corey? Or suspect? "You're my husband' I'd take you if I could."

He chuckled. "Oh, I know. But at least you'll have Corey there for a shoulder to lean on."

I stopped moving. "I'm not in love with him or anything—"

He laughed. "No, I know. I meant it's good you'll have a friend there. He can keep you from flirting with the locals. He doesn't flirt with you, does he?"

I started moving again, wanting to put it past me. "No, of course not. We're friends and that's all there is." There was no way Reggie could understand. What had happened to me, anyway? Had I changed from the prim wife I had been into what? I had sought to ease the loneliness and found a new avenue of relationship with Corey that didn't hurt my relationship with my husband. But could anyone understand that except for me and Corey?

Reggie grunted. "Maybe he's gay."

I laughed nervously. "He's not; he's married to Leane."

"Yeah, why would a beautiful woman marry a gay guy? But he's never flirted with you?"

I stopped moving, frowning, giving it serious thought. I searched my memory as best I could over the past two years I'd known him. "I don't think...he ever has..."

"You don't think?"

"Well..." I felt a blush building.

"Well what? Has he or hasn't he?" He didn't sound angry.

"He's looked at my legs a few times. Like, my stockings."

Reggie squeezed my hips and began moving under me. "Yeah, I've noticed them, too. I love it. Guess I can't blame him for that."

I felt better. "He's very devoted to Leane."

He smiled, nodding. "That's good." His cock flexed in me and he sped his upward thrusting. "Maybe I'll have to talk to him and have him keep an eye out on you for me."

I was sure Corey and I had a little friendship rendezvous planned while at the annual. "I really don't think you have anything to worry about..." I trailed off as I felt him getting close.

I marveled at the US Virgin Islands. "The air is so fresh and the water so blue..." I followed the resort guide and walked towards the beach hut I was assigned.

Corey was shaking his head. "Ask me three years ago if I would ever come here and I woulda said the closest I could come was Crystal Beach."

"Texas seems a long way away."

"It does."

I entered my hut and stood in shock. Small and orderly, it was also completely modern.

Corey touched my arm. "What's wrong? See a spider?"

"No...I just expected holes in the walls, seagulls in the rafters and a bamboo cot or something."

He laughed. "I'm going to go check out mine. See you in a bit." He left with the guide.

I moved my suitcase to the luggage stand and zipped it open. I selected out some khaki shorts and a sleeveless blouse for some beach-walking.

A knock on the door had my blouse half-unbuttoned. Did Corey forget something? I answered the door to Chase Miller. He gave me a bright smile and waved a manila envelope. I let him in.

He kept waving that envelope, a glint in his eye. "It took just a little wrangling, but congratulations on your promotion."

"My promotion?"

"To Chief Human Resources Officer."

My heart hammered in my chest. I had not dared think I would get it.

He flashed his teeth at me in genuine pleasure. "Human Resources Manager to Chief Human Resources Officer in less than a year. But you deserve it." He handed me the manila. "Open it later, you won't be disappointed, I assure you."

"I don't know what to say."

"You'll want to prepare a little speech for the banquet. You'll be announced. But in the meantime, let's say we celebrate?"

Another knock sounded.

I said, "Excuse me."

He waited patiently while I answered.

Corey was grinning. "How about drinks?"

I let him in.

Chase said, "That's exactly what I had in mind. By the way, you're being elevated as a formal Human Resources Manager, Corey. You'll be picking up a lot of Lauren's work."

Corey looked perplexed. He turned to me. "You're leaving?"

I was shaking my head.

Chase grumbled, "Heavens no, she got promoted."

Corey's eyes lit up. "That's great!"

"Let's go get a good umbrella and drink to both of your successes."

I giggled. "Is the dress code any different?"

Chase wiggled his feet in the sand. "Better not be. I don't think I'd want to see you all covered up."

Corey laughed low and long. "Me, neither."

Chase leaned across me and spoke to Corey. "Just so you know, I have no designs on your woman. What happened was just for her birthday."

"My woman? Lauren or Leane?"

What are they talking about? I gulped my drink.

Chase moved back a little looking at me. "She didn't tell you?"

"About what?" Corey sounded curious.

"I took her for drinks on her birthday. And a little more happened. I thought you two were a couple."

Corey looked at me and Chase. He said, "Lauren and I are deep friends and..."

My boss was nodding slowly. "No, I get it. Not having an affair, just..."

Corey blushed. "Right. It's just friendship."

Chase chuckled. "I see. Good, then I won't have to refrain from looking at her legs. She is something to look at, isn't she?"

Me?

Corey said, "She sure is. I get so hard looking at her."

My boss grunted. "I'm hard looking at her right now. First time I laid eyes on her I could see she was hiding that animal inside her. I knew I could never get permanently involved with her – not like I am with Shirley." Shirley was his personal assistant.

I perked up at that. "Nerdy Shirley?"

He shook his finger at me. "She's not so nerdy with her clothes off." He looked over at Corey. "What attracted you to Lauren, anyway?"

Corey made a sound. "Her glasses, her hair—"

I was astonished. "My glasses?"

Chase nudged me. "You can't hide sexy eyes behind glasses."

"Me?"

"What do you say, Corey? Do you think she needs a spanking?"

He gulped his drink, that familiar hunger in his eyes as he looked at me and licked his lips. "She sure does."

I giggled, but heat flared at my clit and warmed my pussy.

They got up, both men showing bulges. I looked around but no one was looking. I was manhandled back to my hut. I melted, feeling overwhelmed as two men took strong hold of me with the intention of being men. My pussy moistened. It was a heady trip that made me feel especially wanted, sexy, and desired. I couldn't have stopped them if I had wanted to.

Corey seemed hesitant, but his bulge told me he was ready to be my friend

again, and I wanted that. It was Chase who began undressing me. He said, "I can't have you back at corporate; too close to home. But maybe once a year isn't so bad a wait."

I was stripped naked and pushed down on the bed.

Chase undressed and Corey took his lead. My boss moved between my knees, offering me his cock. Even half-hard, it was huge. I mentally shrugged, wondering if my tongue would have an orgasm for me. I took him in my mouth.

Corey sighed raggedly. "Wow, she looks hot doing that." He began stroking his smaller cock.

I mused to myself, I do? I moved with more relish, giving my best friend a show. I pulled back, licking up the shaft as I looked at Corey. My tongue swirled around the head of Chase's cock as I looked into my friend's eyes.

He looked delirious. He got behind me on the bed and scooted forward. I could feel his cock press against my lower back. His head came to the left side of mine and began kissing my neck as I sucked Chase. His hands came around and began rubbing over my nipples.

I moaned, licking and sucking as the heat built inside me. It spread rapidly, but distant. Corey's kisses were torture on my neck, sending shivers down my back and arms. I pulled my mouth off Chase and jacked him. I turned my head to Corey and sighed, my mouth close to his. He hesitated a second, but then kissed me. Our tongues fucked. His hand came down and began rubbing me gently, spreading that heat and building the tension inside me.

Chase lifted me, breaking my kiss with Corey. He eased me back and pulled my hips to the edge of the bed. I felt the enormous head of his cock press and move around my pussy hole. Then he was pushing.

I reached for Corey's dick and began stroking it, my mouth open in a gasp as my pussy was stretched and filled with Chase's cock. Having two men together like this made my body burn with fires of desire.

Corey moved up and I took his dick into my mouth, sucking hard and licking fast.

My body moved with Chase's easy thrusts and I was able to keep my mouth on Corey's cock.

My boss murmured, "She's got a fantastic pussy." He began thrusting harder.

Corey whispered, "She sure does."

I groaned with pleasure as the heat spread faster.

Chase pulled out. "Take over, Corey."

They switched places. Corey's familiar cock entered my pussy and began that inner massage I had grown to enjoy. My boss leaned over, offering me his erection. It hung down and I eagerly took it in my mouth.

My jaw is going to hurt tomorrow...

Corey pumped faster and deeper. It felt good.

Chase reached his hand down and began fingering my clit as Corey pumped in and out. The dual sensations and the eroticism of a cock in my mouth and pussy was too much for me. My insides wound tighter until they quivered with tension.

Just a little more... Almost...there...

Chase's cock flexed in my mouth and that did it. My clit exploded with release, sending tidal waves of sensation surging through my body. I moaned and writhed, my mouth off Chase's cock.

They moved, but I was too busy cumming. I was flipped over onto my hands and knees. By the thickness that invaded me, I could tell Chase had re-entered my pussy. I was jerked forward with hard thrusts. His large ballsack slapped at my clit, sending spasms of ecstasy surging through me. My head flopped as his hips slammed into mine. Everything on me shook.

I could feel Corey's heat near my head, but I was floating on a numbing wave of surrender. It was too good to fight, too good to resist, and far too good to stop. My pussy was given the harsh hammering it needed and I had no idea which way was up. I was making sounds in my throat I couldn't identify – each pound of his hips against me sending me further and further into a place of peace.

Chase grabbed my hair and gently pulled back, lifting my head. I opened my eyes, my mouth hanging open and slack. Corey looked feverish, and was stroking his cock as he watched. He scooted forward and put his erection into my mouth. The act was so sensuous that I felt as if my numb place of peace was launched even further, soaring airily into surrender. I slurped on him with abandon. I wanted this and I enjoyed every pussy-pounding second.

I was surprised when Corey stiffened, his erection swelling in my mouth. I moaned as his first burst of cum splashed against the back of my throat. I was ready, and began reflexively swallowing. I had never done this for him before and somehow it felt good and right to do it for him now with his wife back home and unavailable. He slumped back away from me after a few seconds.

Chase grabbed my shoulders and pulled back with each thrust. Just when I began to wonder if he was having trouble finishing, he began groaning loudly. With a final, forceful thrust, he buried his large cock in me and came. His explosions of heat and wetness went deep. With the last orgasm, I felt a surge of happiness and satisfaction swell over me and make me smile.

A little later, after Chase had left, I was lying with Corey. He was teasing my nipple and getting hard doing it. He said, "We've done this quite a bit. You are on birth control, aren't you?"

"No."

He sat up in alarm. "No?"

"You never asked before. You're asking now?" I looked at him curiously.

His cock bobbed with excitement, but his face was concerned. "I just always thought you'd be prepared for that..."

I made a face. "A long time ago, I miscarried. I made a decision then." I made cutting motions with my fingers.

He looked at me for a very long time, still hard. Then he climbed over me. I spread my legs, allowing him. He settled down on me and slid his cock into my used pussy. He was gentle and it felt good. He kissed me just as softly and then said, "I'm sorry to hear about that." His moves were tender and I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him.

EPILOGUE

I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the Virgin Islands. The hall we held our first dinner in was expansive and at the same time, almost open-aired quaint. I think I could probably die here and just count my life as fulfilled.

I was announced that first dinner. Perhaps I wasn't important enough for the second or third dinner, but I didn't care. This was my moment in the spotlights and all due to my effort and work. I approached the podium in the very subdued lights. Torches burned outside of the open windows and the ocean breeze was warm and inviting. The applause at my announcement wasn't stadium-style and raucous, it was polite.

Gripping the podium, I looked at the nearer tables. I saw many pleased faces there, but also a few that scowled. I had made a couple of enemies coming up and implementing the ideas I had, but most of the executives approved. Perhaps my strategy would turn those enemies into supporting allies; I didn't know.

I adjusted the mic. "I want to thank Chase Miller for having faith in me, and my associate Corey Dillon for his support." I spied Corey smiling at our table. "I come from the Lone Star state, and our motto there is 'Don't tread on me.' I have used this..."

I was naked on my husband, sliding my pussy back and forth on him to get him erect, many conflicting things going through my mind. Back at home, several realities came back to me and collided; I was still trying to sort through the mess. I had a solid friendship with Corey and I was very satisfied with it and the few times per week sex that went with it. I had a working relationship with Chase that included a once a year liaison that promised just enough nastiness to be refreshing. But here I was, moving my bare pussy on my husband whom I loved so dearly, and at a loss.

Where did my home life meet with my business life? Was there to be a constant disconnect? It didn't seem like it should, but my husband wasn't going to

understand my evolution as a part of my career. While I trusted him so completely as to be helpless in his embrace, somehow I couldn't trust him to understand Corey. Or Chase, once a year. Does it have to be this way?

He said something and I started to frown, irritated at the interruption of my thoughts. If I could only figure this out. What did he say? I put away my thoughts for now, my love for my husband overcoming my need to incessantly figure things out. I decided to listen to my husband. "I'm sorry?"

He was semi-hard under me, his cock lying on his lower abdomen, but his eyes were bright and he was smiling. He said, "I asked if Corey watched over you at the annual."

"Oh. Yes, he did."

He nodded. "Did he flirt with you?"

I stopped moving, replaying his question in my thoughts.

Reggie moved his head dismissively. "You know, like look at your legs? You said he had before."

A cascade of thoughts and memories of Corey and Reggie raced through me. I had listened, and heard his question. "Would you be mad if he had?"

I felt him flex under me and stiffen. "No, I suppose not. He'd have to be gay not to flirt with you."

I started moving again, moving my pussy back and forth along his shaft. Soon, it might be hard enough to get it inside.

His eyes searched mine and looked away, only to come back again. He asked, "Any hugs or kisses?"

I could see the pulse beating in his neck; it was fast. I kept moving, trying not to wonder if I had been missing something all along. "There might have been a hug or two..."

His mouth opened in a gasp and his eyes fell away from mine. He looked embarrassed and I wasn't sure why. He definitely was now fully hard under me,

ready to insert. He said, "Did he kiss you?"

I decided a little bit of truth mixed with excuse might give me time to really listen to him and digest what he was meaning. I kept teasing his cock. "I had a few drinks." I laughed nervously. "And I was a bit tipsy. I believe there was a kiss in there somewhere."

My husband groaned, his mouth open. His hands on my hips shook. His cock flexed dramatically against my pussy. "Was it just a peck? Or something nicer?"

I could feel his excitement. I had felt all along, I just hadn't listened. I moved suggestively. "I remember it being pretty hot."

He gasped, thrusting his hips up. His chest was visibly thudding to his heartbeat.

I went one step further, the pieces falling into place. All it had taken was listening. "What if..."

His eyes that had avoided mine suddenly locked with my gaze. "What?"

I moved my hips faster. "What if I told you we did more than kissed?"

My husband cried out, his cock swelling and jerking. Not being in me, his cum burst out of his shaft, wetting his neck, chest and abdomen in a gushing, rushing display of intent.

I settled onto his chest and kissed him desperately.

Thank you for reading Suite Seductions. All reviews are appreciated.

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