

Chapter One

“God, I hate Mondays.” Anna ran her fingers through her long auburn hair. She may have gotten Dad’s long chin, button nose and the monster tush, but at least she had his great hair. Thick curls fell softly to her shoulders. Ok, so she had to touch up the few strands of gray, but at the ripe old age of forty-nine, a few strands weren’t too bad.

She punched at the keys of her computer, looking for the right file. The new guy was coming, and she couldn’t find the damn client files. New Guy was replacing Fred Sterling, a tubby, nasty little man who rumor had it once pissed off Mother Teresa, not to mention important clients. His two martini lunches were the stuff of legend. That was until Anna discovered the last straw, heavily padded expense accounts. Fred had been submitting three figure lunch tabs from the same Tribeca restaurant for months. Hand written receipts were unusual in this day of computers, but not unheard of. Something still didn’t feel right. She’d pulled several weeks reports. The receipts in question were written by the same hand. They were also sequential. Fred never was the brightest bulb in the box. A quick call to the restaurant confirmed they ran all receipts through the cash register. It was one thing to tick off clients, but stealing money from the boss’s pocket was a mortal

sin at Barrow. Freddy boy was left to concentrate all his efforts on his martinis, without those pesky clients to get in the way.

Now Anna was searching madly for Fred's files. She wouldn't have put it past him to delete them. She was just about ready to track Fred down and throttle him when a satisfactory beep sounded. Instead of deleting, nasty little Fred had renamed the files. Anna's search based on user and last changed date rather than file name had been the key to success.

"Yes! I'm awesome!" she crowed.

"That's good to know," said an all-too familiar voice.

Anna looked up and blanched. Before her stood John Freeman, CEO of Barrow International, the world's leading distributor of luxury leather goods, and king of all he surveyed, including Anna. Dressed in a thousand-dollar suit and a five-hundred-dollar tie, Freeman tried to be the perfect picture of the high-powered Manhattan executive. It was a look he never quite pulled off. His pasty and slightly bloated face was the combination of cruel DNA and one too many late-night parties. Standing with Freeman was a man she assumed was New Guy. He towered over Freeman, but then at what Anna guessed was a six-foot three inch or so frame, New Guy towered over everyone.

"Good morning, Mr. Freeman," Anna said.

"I'd like you to meet Jim Kelly. He'll be taking over the Northeast territory."

New Guy was sharply dressed in a charcoal gray suit that set off his sterling gray hair, crisp white shirt and black and grey striped tie. She imagined his closely trimmed mustache and goatee were once all black but were now a stylish mix of black and gray. He must pay a fortune to his tailor to get the suit to fit so perfectly on his long, lean frame. His

most dazzling accessories were not the silver and pearl cuff links on his French cuffs. They were sparkling sea green eyes. New Guy extended his hand. "It's very nice to meet you Anna...?"

"O'Connell."

New Guy smiled, and a fine smile it was, instantly warming her. "An Irish girl, or is that your married name?"

Anna laughed. "Divorced, and the name is original equipment." "Nice work," she thought, "Finding out my heritage and marital status in one question." She quickly chastised herself. "Chill. He's a salesman. He's just being nice."

Freeman interrupted her spinning thoughts. "I'd like you work with Jim. Fill him in on the client list, any pending sales in the file." He turned his attention. "Jim, Anna's one of our oldest employees. She'll take care of you."

"Kill me now," she thought, pasted smile never wavering.

"I've got a ten o'clock flight, so I'll catch up with you in a few days." Freeman waved his hand at her as he walked away, "Don't forget the office details, expense reports, all that. Take care of him for me Anna."

"Yes, my liege," she murmured to Freeman's retreating.

She started at the sound of a stifled laugh. New Guy had a very nice smile indeed, and apparently a sense of humor. "I'm sorry Mr. Kelly, I...,"

"Don't worry. I'll never tell. And it's Jim."

"Ok...Jim."

Anna gathered folders and rose to her feet, trying to retrieve some dignity. The two-year-old Adolfo suit, which had been perfectly acceptable this morning, now felt horribly

out of date. She started forward and bumped squarely into him. So much for dignity. At five feet and five wishful inches, Anna barely reached the middle of his chest. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Moving and thinking are sometimes running on different tracks for me. I’m a hazard.”

Jim laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Let me show you to your office.”

Anna moved about Fred’s old office, which had been thoroughly cleansed of his presence, including the half empty pad of receipts she’d found hidden in the credenza. She explained the phone system and gave him a briefing on the computers, including his passwords.

“I’ll let you get settled. Here’s your new hire packet. Buzz me when you’re ready and I’ll bring you your client list. You have two appointments before the end of the week that couldn’t be changed so unfortunately you’ll have to get up to speed pretty quick.”

“You’ll be able to help me, yes?”

Jim smiled again, and her heart skipped a beat. Damn useful tool for a salesman, that smile. She resolved to reign in her aging hormones.

Chapter Two

The inquisition began.

“Is that the new guy?” Viki and Jessica were waiting at her desk.

“Yes. Jim Kelly.”

“Nice,” purred Viki.

“Not bad for an old guy,” Jessica said.

“Jessica, you think everyone over thirty is old,” Anna replied. Jessica was adorable, and it was as natural as it was unintentional. It was practically a badge she wore reading “*I am the cutest thing you will see all day – guaranteed.*” She wore a bare minimum of makeup. At twenty-one, who needed foundation? Her flowing brown curls were natural as was her voluptuous figure. Anna couldn’t understand how someone could be a size four and still be so curvy. Viki was only slightly older than Jessica. A tall slender blonde, Viki looked like she’d just gotten back from the West Chester Country Club, and she probably had. She was born to carry a Barrow bag.

“So, what’s the deal? Married or what?” asked Viki.

“Down girl. I just met the man. Let him get his coat off before you proposition him.”

“He wasn’t wearing a coat.” Jessica was very literal.

“Get back to work,” Anna sighed as she waved her hand at the girls. They mock saluted.

“Yes ma’am,” they replied.

Anna watched the girls return to their cubicles. She silently vowed the next time she advertised for an admin the requirements would include over thirty and at least a size twelve.

“Anna?”

Her head snapped around to see Jim standing by her desk holding his new hire packet.

“I’m assuming you need this?”

She took the packet and quickly riffled through the papers. “To hell with withholding, where’s the important part?” she thought. Her eyes quickly scanned the sheets. She calculated his birth date. Fifty-One. S was checked on the W-4.

“Yes,” she stumbled. “I’ll get it to payroll.”

“I saw the fleeing masses. Your troops?”

“You could say that. I’m the office manager so all the admins report to me.”

“I see,” he said.

His eyes held her. And that smile, it would be the death of her. Damn, this was one good looking man. She glanced down at the papers and gave herself a mental shake. She’d been alone too long. That’s all it was. She looked up again.

Nope. That wasn’t it. This was just a damn fine-looking man.

Chapter Three

“Do you have time to go over the client lists?” asked Jim. He smiled to himself. Anna flushed a bright shade of red, almost matching her lush hair. For some reason he embarrassed her. Not a good way to start off, he thought, but it looked so cute on her.

“Yes, of course.” She grabbed the files and followed him back to his office. “Would you like some coffee?” she asked.

“I saw the break room on the way in. Why don’t I get us both a cup while you get ready to pound those files into my brain?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. I used to get Fred coffee...”

“I’m not Fred.”

“Thank God,” she responded automatically, and then blushed again. “Oh, I...”

“It’s okay.” He was going to have to figure out why he embarrassed her so much. Anna O’Connell seemed to be the go-to person in the office. He had to start out on the right foot with her. “What do you like?”

“Excuse me?”

“In your coffee.”

“Oh, ah...two sugars and some milk. Not the artificial stuff. There’s real milk in the fridge.”

Jim found two company mugs and was reaching for the pot when a tall blonde approached him.

“Hi. You must be Mr. Kelly. I’m Viki Crane.” She extended her perfectly manicured hand.

“It’s nice to meet you. Call me Jim.”

“Ok...Jim,” she said as though she’d tasted something delicious. “Here let me do that.” She snatched the mugs from him before he could protest. Viki followed him back to his office, mugs in hand. “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“Everything’s under control, Viki,” answered a stern Anna. She was bent over his desk arranging files. Jim couldn’t help but notice the cleavage peeking out from her blouse. He’d always been a leg man, but Anna O’Connell might just change his mind. Jim closed the door behind him and handed her a mug.

Sitting in the small chair next to his desk she opened a file. “Both your meetings are in the city so at least you won’t to travel this week. Your first meeting is Wednesday. Carl Wesel, owner of Serendipity, an upscale chain in based in New York, with stores in Miami, Los Angeles, D.C. and Chicago. It’s basically a meet and greet. Carl orders just about the entire line every season. It’s only five stores and normally we wouldn’t give them this much personal attention. But they are very high-profile stores, catering to celebs and power brokers. Mr. Freeman likes to pop in from time to time and have his picture taken with the starlet du jour.”

“Booze and schmooze,” said Jim

“Exactly. Make sure he’s happy. I’ve already booked you at Carl’s favorite restaurant in the Village. I hope you can handle Japanese-Cuban fusion.”

“Lord,” he muttered. He hated pretense in any form, especially in his food. Anna smiled. Apparently Japanese-Cuban fusion wouldn’t be her first choice either. He stared at her a bit longer than he should, but it was such a nice smile. She handed him a large binder marked Serendipity and turned her attention to the next file.

“This is the one that’s going to be a bear. William Taylor, head buyer for Taylor department stores and its affiliates, nearly one hundred mid to high end department stores across the country.”

Jim glanced over the file she’d prepared. There were clippings of Taylor in red carpet photos and at restaurant openings.

“A lot of people dismiss him because he’s the owner’s son. Don’t. He worked his way up the ladder from stock boy. Daddy’s never given him anything he didn’t earn.”

“And the problem?”

“Your predecessor was one of those who underestimated his authority. Taylor used to carry eighty percent of line and they were one of our biggest customers. After a particularly nasty incident at a charity ball last month Taylor dropped everything but the Barrow bag and even that he cut from five thousand units per year to less than two thousand.”

Jim had become familiar enough with the line before his final interview to know the Barrow bag was the flagship piece of the company. Retailing for fifteen hundred dollars a bag, its design had remained essentially unchanged since the company’s inception. It was

a classic design made of glove soft Italian leather with its trademark brass fitting. Once he'd learned the design he'd made a mental game of spotting them on the street. He'd seen at least six on his way in this morning.

“So that was when they let him go.”

“That combined with other factors.”

“Mr. Freeman wants me to get the piece count back to five thousand?” Jim didn't like the look on Anna's face. Actually, the way she was gnawing on her bottom lip was adorable, but it didn't bode well.

“He wants you to get the entire line back in every store. I got Taylor to give you an hour on Friday. He goes to his place in the Hampton's on Friday afternoons, so you'll have to dazzle to keep his attention.”

Jim blew air through gritted teeth. “He doesn't want much my first week, does he? Why didn't he tell me himself?”

Anna sighed and leaned back against her chair. “Mr. Freeman's a great delegator.”

“And you got the duty?”

“Yes, well...”

“If you don't mind my saying, you seem to be a lot more than an office manager.”

“Freeman's funny about titles, especially for women. After all these years I've learned to live with it. I don't care if he calls me ‘Chief Cook and Bottle Washer’ so long as the paychecks keep coming.”

Jim smiled. She was definitely the go-to person. He paged through the thick folder. It had been carefully prepared with purchase histories and background information on Taylor Affiliated, Inc.

“Let me go over this and form a plan of attack. At the very least I’m going to want to see demographics on Taylor’s client base.”

“That’s Jessica’s area. I’ll have her get right on it,” Anna replied. She rose to leave and Jim stopped her by covering her hand with his.

“Thank you, Anna.”

“For what?”

“For getting me prepared and for all the work still ahead of us.” Us. He liked that. Why? Probably the same reason he was still touching her. He pulled his hand back.

She smiled. Damn nice smile. “You’re welcome.”

Jim stared at the closed door. What the hell was wrong with him? He never chased women, let alone women he worked with. He’d been there less than three hours and he was jonesing for the office manager. He dragged the Taylor file in front of him and began flipping pages.

Chapter Four

Jim stood in the hallway watching her. Her cubicle was larger than the other admins. It was tidy and efficient, like Anna, but there were no pictures of family, just a gray tabby cat. She was running her hand through her hair, obviously lost in thought. It looked so soft. He imagined running his hands through it, maybe right after...

“Snap out of it, Kelly,” he chided himself. “You’re worked up over the new job.” His eyes wandered to her ample cleavage. “Yeah, right. It’s just the job.”

She noticed him lurking and she smiled. “Hi, Jim. Is there something I can do for you?”

“I’ve decided how I want to approach this.” He raised the files in his hand. “Let’s grab some lunch and go over the details.”

“Oh...”

“I’m sorry. Do you have plans?”

“No, I’m just a little surprised. Salesmen normally don’t take staff to lunch.”

In the few meetings he’d had with Freeman and the other salesmen he’d seen the staff treated with the same regard as a computer or a copy machine. Their mistake, not his.

“I doubt I’m the kind of salesman you’re used to.”

“Thank God,” she murmured.

He smiled. “So, let’s go. There’s a great seafood place around the corner. Their lobster bisque is excellent.”

She held his gaze. “Sounds delicious.”

Anna shut down her computer and picked up a portfolio and her purse, neither of which were Barrow.

Chapter Five

Geary's was set in a tight between a hippie chic boutique and a small gallery. Less than two dozen tables were set tight together. It was still early for lunch by New York standards, only noon. They were the only seating.

"I've heard good things about this place."

"You've never been? It's only a block from the office."

"I usually bring lunch."

Freeman didn't pay her enough. Jim suspected as much when he saw the generic handbag. His years selling in the business told him hers was good quality but far from new.

"How did you come to Barrow?" she asked.

"I was with Armani for ten years, sales on the East Coast and Canada."

"You comped Freeman three suits last year."

"How did you know?"

"I didn't think he would *buy* three custom Armani's in one season."

Jim laughed. She was sharp. "I met him last year during Fashion Week. When this position opened up he called me."

“I’m glad he did.” She smiled and everything in him screamed to attention. He was seated close enough to tell her perfume wasn’t flowery, but a full musky scent. Her bright blue eyes sparkled.

“It’s not the job,” he thought.

He’d be eternally grateful to the waiter who picked that moment to take their order.

“How long have you been with Barrow?”

“I came here from Bloomingdale’s offices, twenty years next month.”

“So, you know where all the bodies are buried.”

Another slow smile. Christ, she was killing him and she didn’t know it. He forced his mind back to business. Over salad they reviewed Serendipity. Anna knew Wesel’s hobbies and habits. Very useful. He would concentrate on this file today, giving him the rest of the week to focus on Taylor. He flipped pages of the Taylor file in between sips of warm soup.

“Do you know Power Point?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“I’d like to put together a presentation for Taylor, ten to fifteen minutes max. Anything longer and I lose him to the Hamptons.”

“I have several on file.”

“All of which I’m sure he’s seen. I’d like to do one specifically for Taylor Affiliated. Compare his demographic to ours and see how they overlap. Make him believe his customers will insist on nothing less than the entire Barrow line.”

“You want an entire presentation from scratch in four days?”

“I need one day for Wesel, so more like three days.”

Anna shook her head then laughed. “You don’t want much your first week, do you?”

Jim grinned. “Why do you think I’m buttering you up with lobster bisque?” He glanced down and flipped the pages of the detailed Taylor file. “It’s a challenge. Are you up for it?”

Her face softened and Jim though he saw a wicked gleam in her eye. She lifted her ice tea in a toast. “Hell, yes.”

Chapter Six

Three days. He was nuts. Certifiable. Maybe. He had fresh ideas and he wanted her opinions. None of the execs at Barrow asked her opinion unless it was ordering a new cappuccino machine for their office.

It was Wednesday afternoon and Jim should arrive from his meeting with Wesel by two. Anna had a good leg up on the Taylor project. She'd tasked Jessica with the necessary demographics and Viki was busy gathering sales slicks of the fall line. Anna would convert everything to slides and together she and Jim would decide what went where. Together.

Her mind drifted. Swaying back and forth to a lovely melody. Being in his arms... Damn it! This is about the job. She flipped through the screens she'd already finished and smiled. They looked good. Really good. She glanced at the clock. One forty-five.

Anna grabbed her bag and dashed to the ladies' room. A blind fumble found a small hairbrush and a tube of lip gloss. She was having a good hair day. Her curls were particularly well behaved today framing her face perfectly. Gloss slide smoothly over her lips. She studied the face before her. Not bad. Her red hair was set off nicely by her hunter green blazer and black pencil skirt. So, she didn't have Viki's blonde perfection or Jessica's inherent sexuality, but all in all, today was a good day. She made it back to her desk in time to bump into Jim exiting the elevator. He smiled. God, she loved that smile.

She looked different. Good, but different. Her hair was doing a Veronica Lake thing, a thick wave flirting in front of her eye. She pushed it aside and gave him a shy wave.

“Well?” she asked as she trailed him to his office.

“What? Oh, the meeting, Wesel.” He moved towards his desk hoping it would give him time to focus his thoughts. “It was fine. Wesel was exactly who you told me he was. A bit over the top, but who isn’t in this business? He told me all about how he started by rolling racks in the district to owning his own stores while sucking down two hundred bucks’ worth of sushi and fried plantains.” Jim handed her an envelope. “This is Freeman’s invite to some party he’s having.”

“The Black Bash?” she asked excitedly.

“Black Bash?” he asked as if she was speaking a foreign language.

She laughed. “Yeah. P.Diddy does white, Carl Wesel does black. It’s a charity auction for Broadway Cares. Every Broadway star and select favorites are invited. The rest of us mere mortals get to bid online. Saves the elite from having to hobnob with the masses. And you got Freeman invited? He’s going to plotz! Of course, he’s going to have to pony up a few Barrow specials for the auction, but for a chance to go to the Black Bash. Even Freeman won’t balk.” Anna turned the engraved invitation over in her hands. “It’s tonight. Very last minute and any regular person would be insulted.”

“Which means Freeman won’t care.”

“Not a bit,” she laughed. “He’d cancel a meeting with God to get into this party.”

Jim smiled as she gushed, her face lit with enthusiasm. He’d figured she was close to his age, but when she spoke like this she looked as young as the kids in the bull pen. He reached in his pocket and waved a second envelope between his fingers.

“You got invited too? What sexual favors did you have to perform?”

She didn’t blush. He took it as a good sign. “I think he wants to make sure Freeman behaves himself.”

“Wesel’s no dummy. Affectatious, yes. Stupid, no.”

“It’s for one and guest.”

Anna glanced down at his desk. “I’m sure your plus one will enjoy herself.”

He grinned. He had her and he knew it. “Who?”

“Your wife.”

“You’ve already read my W-4 and know I’m divorced.”

“Your girlfriend.”

“I’ve been here three days and haven’t received one outside call. I have no pictures of females, family or otherwise in my office but you already know this. He grinned. “You’re fishing.”

She looked back up, her mouth curved in a slight smile. “Ok, so I’ve figured you’re not attached. It’s my duty to the bull pen to get the details on New Guy.”

“I take it I’m New Guy.”

“Until you ask one of them out. Then you become the guy that Viki’s dating or Jessica’s dating or anyone of the others who’ve quizzed me.”

“Others?” he laughed.

“Oh you’re quite the hot topic in the break room. There’s even money you’ll ask Viki out before the end of the month. I know she’d love to go to Wesel’s party. And Wesel would love to have her there. Lovely blondes are de rigueur.”

“Where are you on the list?”

Anna exploded with laughter. “Why in God’s name would I be on the list? They’re all sweet young things with great personalities and winning bodies.” She glanced down at the floor. “I’m just an old lady who lives with her cat.”

This time Jim laughed. Then he stepped closer and spoke softly. First of all you are most definitely not old. Secondly Viki and Jessica are nice kids.”

“As I said...”

“But they’re just that, kids. Why would I want to go out with a kid?”

Anna tried to gather her bearings. This was not going the way she expected. “They’re beautiful, charming...”

“So are you,” he answered so quickly she had no choice but to smile.

“Anna, I never intended to ask anyone but you.”

She tried to gather shreds of dignity about her in hopes it would protect her from the hideous mistake he was making. “Well, it would be business. I do know Wesel and how to handle him. And I can keep Freeman in check too.”

Jim took her by the hand. “No business. Anna O’Connell, will you go out on a date with me? The kind of date where I pick you up at your apartment and take you someplace fun. Hopefully this ‘Black Bash’ qualifies. Then I take you home.”

“And you maintain your reputation as a perfect gentleman,” she laughed, hoping she’d join him. He didn’t.

“On that point I make no guarantees.”

Her heart beat in triple time.

He stroked a stray curl from her cheek. “Look Anna, I know we’ve only just met. But I like you, a lot. I think you like me. We could be like those kids out in the bullpen and dance around this for weeks, but for God sakes why?

“That’s what I was going to ask. Why. Why me?”

Jim studied her face. Lovely pale Irish skin flushing red, strands of wild auburn curls flying. Was she wearing it more loose these days? And she looked genuinely confused. As if he’d asked her for a dissertation on global economics, not for a simple date.

He spoke softly as if she were the only person on the planet, not just the room. “Because you’re beautiful, you’re charming, and you remember the same presidents I do.”

He took her hand and stroked it lightly. “And one more reason.”

She managed only a whisper, “What’s that.”

“I like cats.”

Chapter Seven

Anna tried not to stumble to her desk. She's just accepted a date. A DATE! Was she insane? This was the head of East Coast distributions. If it went wrong it could mean her job. They never fired the guys in these things, always the woman.

"Hey Anna," Jessica appeared in front of her desk. "Here are the reports you asked for."

Anna tucked them in her overflowing 'in' bin.

"So?" asked Jessica.

"How did New Guy make out with Wesel? He can be such a drama queen."

"Mr. Kelly," she said pointedly, "made out just fine. Mr. Wesel is very happy. So much so that he and Mr. Freeman have been invited to "The Black Bash."

"Shut up!" Jessica said. It took Anna weeks to figure out that was an exclamation and not an insult. "I can't believe it. Wesel thinks Freeman is so beneath him. *The Trades*' you know. Anna laughed as Sara's perfectly feigned Wesel's cultivated upper west side accent. It was especially funny because the whole industry new he was from Scranton, Pennsylvania, hardly the mecca for the latest and greatest in fashion trends.

He and Mr. Freeman will be attending, but don't spill the beans. Jim hasn't given him the invitation yet."

Jessica's eyebrows lifted at the use of New Guy's first name. Jessica was a lot smarter than people gave her credit for. Jess would be running the company before she hit thirty-five. "Well that's amazing. I don't know how he did it. He must be a magician."

Anna looked at Jim's closed door. "I think he may just be."

"So who's he taking?"

"Who?" replied Anna, pinning her eyes back to Jess's inquisitive face.

"We know Freeman will go stag in the hopes of hooking up with some bimbo. What about Kelly? Acting as Freeman's wing man? Guide him to all the lovelies?"

"Don't you have work to do?" Anna asked.

"Yes and I better get back to it." She smiled her trademark grin. "My boss is a slave driver." She turned to leave and then faced Anna again. "Are you doing something with your hair?"

Anna ran nervous fingers through it. "I don't think so. Same ole' mop top."

Jessica looked her up and down and Anna knew she'd instantly analyzed the new DKNY suit, blouse and worst of all Jimmy Choo shoes. But Anna also knew Jess never spoke out of turn.

"Well, either way, you're having a great hair day. Looks like you're working a little magic yourself."

Chapter Eight

This was nuts. She should be working on the Taylor presentation. Instead she was slipping into a black sheath that the size two sales girl assured her made her look *divine*, heavy accent on the “D”. The Jimmy Choo shoes were classic black stilettos and would look just fine with the crepe de shine dress. No point in going nuts with the budget.

She tamed her hair as best she could, piling it in a loose chignon at the top of her head. Safe money would have her pins popping before the end of the night. O’Connell hair despised being restrained. She chose minimal jewelry, since minimal was all she owned. Black onyx earrings that dangled just above her shoulders. A matching pendant hung just above her breasts. Anna took one last look in the mirror. This was as good as it got. He’d just have to deal with it.

Precisely at eight the buzzer rang from the street. “Hello,” called Jim.

“Right on time.”

“Nasty habit.”

She paced the width of the hallway as she waited for her date. Missy, her gray tabby matched her step, wondering what was up with mommy? A date for God’s sake! With an exec? What the hell was she thinking? This was all wrong. She would keep the conversation to business and get out of it as soon as possible, before...”

“Knock, Knock.”

Anna braced herself, pasted on a professional grin and opened the door. He took her breath away. His tux was perfectly formed to his trim body. At six foot three he engulfed the narrow doorway. Instead of the typical white shirt and bow tie he wore complimentary variations of a black shirt and tie. He was carrying a bouquet of peach roses. Neither one moved.

“Oh my God,” he whispered.

“What?” she panicked.

“You look incredible.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Anna realized that they’d been standing in the doorway far too long. “Please come in.” He handed her the roses. “They’re beautiful.”

While she fished a vase out of the back of her china closet she heard talking from behind the kitchen door. “And what is your name? Aren’t you a pretty girl?”

She returned to the living room to find Missy thoroughly ensconced in Jim’s lap, and his several thousand-dollar Armani tux.

“Oh, my God! I’m so sorry. She never does that.”

Amazingly he just smiled, despite the fact he now looked like Missy’s natural father. “Good cat karma. They all love me. Walk by the fish market and I’m a regular pied piper.”

“Missy, get off!”

Missy looked up with her disdainful green marble eyes. “Is that where they came up with cat’s eye?” she thought. “Focus, damn it, focus.”

“Missy, down.” It was obvious she wasn’t going anywhere. “You’re petting her doesn’t help and she is shedding all over you.”

“I assume you have lint rollers?”

“Dozens.”

“Well, then, no problem.” He stood, and Anna fetched a sticky roller from a nearby drawer. She began to remove the remnants of grey and black Missy hair from his legs. She reached his previously occupied lap and surrendered the roller. “Perhaps you better take it from here.”

“That might be best.”

Sufficiently de-Missy-fied, Jim set the roller down. “Anna, there is one thing I’d like to take care of now. We’ve decided this is an official date.”

“Well, yes,” she stammered.

“The most awkward thing on a first date is the first kiss. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well I...”

“Of course, it is. Should I, or shouldn’t I? Will she, or won’t she?” He moved closer. “I’ve already answered my questions.”

A slight smile played across her lips. “I think you know my answer.”

His eyes lit. He tilted his head, slightly covering her mouth. He placed not one but several small kisses on her lips. They were sweet, tender, undemanding...perfect.

He needed to get out of her apartment fast. They had to get to the party. Freeman would kill him if he was late. And yet the last thing, the very last thing he wanted to do at this moment was please John Freeman.

Who knew? He'd wanted to kiss her. If he was honest with himself, and he usually was, he'd wanted to kiss her from the first time she'd called the pompous Freeman 'my liege.' He'd meant to just make it a small kiss, a proper first kiss date. Who was he kidding? He'd have stayed all night tasting every inch of her.

Adorable. Who'd have figured he'd find a woman her age adorable. She had wit and charm and a rack on her that was driving him to distraction thanks to the cleavage on that damn dress. There was none of the pretense of the other women in the office, the other girls in the office. Anna was all woman, as noted in the aforementioned dress. And yet there was that schoolgirl blush he adored when he complimented her. Seriously adorable.

The elevator closed and headed to the parking garage. He suddenly prayed for a power outage. Emergency lights, shadows playing on the curves of her creamy soft skin, and him taking a dive straight for that glorious neckline.

Ding. Parking garage. Thank God.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Nine

Wesel's loft was roughly the same square footage as Barrow's main offices. Anna didn't know how a decorator could pull off an all black theme, but they did. She made a mental note to get the name. Black tablecloths were accented with silver charger plates filled with appetizers. It seemed all the color in the room was saved for the food. Shrimp, crab, asparagus spears, oyster shells stuffed with tempting bits of scallops.

She was glad to have something to focus on other than Jim. Did he have to look so good? She'd pass up everything on the buffet tables for one more taste of him. Oh God, she was in trouble.

John Freeman was easy to spot. You heard him before you saw him. Before he came quite into vision you could smell the expensive cologne. Up close and personal wasn't much better. He wore expensive suits, apparently this year's thanks to Jim, with perfectly appointed shirts ties and solid gold cuff links. He still looked like a used car salesman. John Freeman was living proof money couldn't buy class.

"We have to," whispered Jim.

"I know," she replied. Anna plastered on 'I work here and I'm happy' smile. Jim took her arm in his and pushed them forward.

"Kelly!" shouted Freeman. "Good to see you made it."

“Wouldn’t have missed it.”

Freeman’s eyes narrowed. “Anna?”

“Good evening Mr. Freeman.”

“What are you doing here?”

Anna felt like she’d been flung back to Victorian London and she’d dared peek out from below stairs. Jim held her arms tighter.

“Anna’s my date,” he said.

“Yes, well...,”

Anna hadn’t ever seen Freeman at a loss for words. Unfortunately, it didn’t last long. He thrust a champagne flute at her “Why don’t you scout me up a refill and Kelly and I will catch up.”

There were very few things that could surprise Anna. The fall of the Iron Curtain, Iraq becoming Vietnam the Sequel, the return of the micro mini skirt; none had come as a shock. That was until...

“That’s what they have servers for, John.” Jim pulled the empty glass from her hand as he nodded to a server with a full tray. Jim handed the empty to the server then pulled full glasses from the tray. He handed the first to her. Out of the corner of her eye she thought Freeman’s fleshy neck turned crimson. Jim took two more glasses, keeping one for himself and handing the last to Freeman. It was the most carefully executed snub she’d ever seen. What was he doing? Freeman would have his head on a pike.

Jim looked at her and smiled. That was it, all she wrote, cooked goose and whatever other platitudes she could think of. They were in this, whatever the hell this was, together.

Freeman grabbed his arm and whispered lowed enough for half the room to hear. “You and O’Connell? What is it? A perk for a job well done?” he grinned.

Anna O’Connell avowed peace, meeting enmity with understanding. But at this moment she would have happily kicked the crap out of him. She imagined what a lovely pattern her Choos would leave.

Jim’s eye’s steeled. “I was very fortunate that Anna agreed to be my date. He took her free hand and kissed it. “A bit over the top,” she thought but it definitely had the desired effect on Freeman, who now resembled a wide mouth bass several days passed its prime.

“If you’ll excuse us John, we haven’t paid our respects to our host.”

Jim moved Anna across the loft towards a clutch of Wesel’s people. “Jim, what are you doing? Freeman is going to be furious with you.”

He spoke through gritted teeth. “I don’t care. No one gets to treat a lady that way.”

Anna halted and pulled on his arm. “You’re still the new guy. You can’t piss him off like this.”

A smile warmed Jim’s face. He traced her chin lightly with his finger. “Don’t worry. Freeman may be pissed but he’s all about the bottom line. Wesel is happy and after Friday we’ll have Taylor back.”

Anna couldn’t help but smile. “You’re awfully confident.”

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly. “Don’t worry. We’re supposed to be having fun.”

The rest of the evening passed quickly. Wesel was the blowhard she remembered from previous meetings at Barrow. He, of course, did not remember her. The rest of the guest list consisted of who's who of New York society. It looked like Wesel had called a service and ordered up the successful party - star package. Broadway, New York TV, Opera and Soap stars, filled the room. Each handed a liveried man an envelope with their donation, doubtful most knew to whom they were contributing. Jim pulled an envelope from his jacket and handed it off.

"I don't think you were expected to make a donation," Anna whispered.

"It's a good cause. Come on. Let's dance."

He pulled her into his arms and moved her across the floor. The stilettos brought her five-and-a-half-foot frame only to his shoulders where she rested her head. Just like the old song. The crowd, the lights all blurred. All she heard was the soft music. All she saw was him. Not even see, more like sensed. His strong arms holding her, a slight musky cologne. Her hand was tucked neatly in his, the other reaching for his neck, fighting the desire to run her fingers through his close cropped hair. She looked up and his smile shot straight through her, warming her more than the excellent champagne.

Damn. This was going to be trouble.

Chapter Ten

“It’s not necessary.”

“A gentleman always escorts his date to the door.”

Anna slipped the key in the lock. “I suppose Missy would be disappointed if you didn’t say goodnight.”

She was nervous as a schoolgirl. Will he kiss me again? Should I let him? She mentally shook herself. What am I, twelve?

“I’d ask you to stay for coffee but it’s a school night,” she smiled. “We only have a day and a half left to finish the Taylor presentation. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“It’s hell being a grownup,” Jim smiled.

“Yeah, it is.”

“If we were kids we wouldn’t be worrying about how much work we had in the morning.” He moved closer. “Or how much sleep we need.” He took her by the shoulders.

Anna barely managed a whisper. “No, we wouldn’t.”

“Let’s be kids, at least for a little while.” He gave her no chance to respond. His mouth covered hers and this time it demanded all she had. Hot, passionate, his tongue invaded and teased. His hands slid to her bottom pulling her tight against him. She felt the reality of his desire. She slid her hands around his neck and played with the close cropped hair she’d longed to touch. The shortest hair at his neck felt rough against her palm, like a beard. So male. Everything about him, every caress, soft or firm, was still all man.

He stopped long enough to nibble on her ear, dropping down to the sweet spot just below on her neck. She heard herself moan. He murmured in her ear. “I’ve wanted to do this all night.”

Anna pushed on his chest, forcing herself away. “What are we doing?”

“Making out? And a damn fine job we’re doing of it if I do say so myself.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. He was too damn cute for his own good. “I know that. I mean things could get complicated. I work for you.”

“Technically you don’t. I checked. You’re the head of your department; I’m the head of mine. We’re colleagues. No conflicts.”

“You checked?” she blushed.

He closed the distance. “Yes, I checked. The H.R. woman, what’s-her-name?”

“Marilyn?”

“Yeah, she gave me the manual and I looked for fraternization. Nothing. I even asked if there was a policy.”

“You asked?”

“She specifically said there was no policy. She was a little strange when I asked about you.”

“About me?” This is not good-not good.

“She told me than you and I are both Tier three employees, whatever that means.”

He folded her back in his arms. “So, you see, colleagues.

Anna smiled up at him. Would Marilyn believe Jim would ask her out? Not a chance. He was nibbling on her neck and she still didn’t believe it. Marilyn would assume he was getting ready to move in on one of the usual suspects. Using every bit of willpower, she had she pushed back again. “Jim, it really is getting late and we do have a lot of work facing us in the morning.”

He smiled. “And you don’t sleep with someone on the first date.”

Oh my God! He wants to sleep with me! Stay cool. Stay focused. Think Carrie Bradshaw.

“No, I don’t sleep with someone on the first date.”

Had she made sense? Had she spoken English? Would Carrie be proud?

“Fair enough,” he kissed her nose. “Tomorrow’s another day.”

Why didn’t she think he was talking about work? She closed the door behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Anna had barely slept all night. If she was going to make it through today she'd need reinforcement, so she braved the line at Starbucks. She's picked a casual day work outfit. She knew she'd be climbing up and down file cabinets, moving presentation boards around and would generally be in Jim's face all day. She felt so exposed around him, but at least her skin wouldn't. Everything else about her felt like an open book Jim was reading out loud. How could one man affect her like this? This wasn't her. Her marriage to Dan was so bad and so long ago that it never crossed her mind, or it hadn't until lately. She was so young and so stupid, and Dan was so handsome and cunning. She'd bought everything hook, line and sinker. He was working late all the time to make a better life for them. Yeah, right. Until she decided to surprise him and showed up at his office with his favorite takeout dinner. His secretary had already provided the meal and it was being served on his desk, naked. But that was more than twenty years ago. Since then there'd been some dating, a few relationships, but nothing earth shattering, mind blowing, knee shaking. She thought she liked it that way. That was until...

The customer in front of her turned a bit too quickly and bumped her arm. "Oh, I'm so sorry," the petite, curly haired woman exclaimed. "Did I get any on you?"

"Not at all. No harm done,"

“Thank goodness. I’d hate to ruin that lovely sweater. Have a good day,” she smiled, and she was gone.

Anna opened her mouth to place her order and then turned back on her heels. Long curls trailed past the window and out of sight. She turned back to the clerk. “Was that?”

“Yup, Sara Jessica herself. Comes in here for the cocoa. Really nice lady.”

Carrie Bradshaw in the flesh. Anna looked at the clerk and smiled. “Make that two espressos.

Jim stared at the presentation slides on his desk. Barrow bags, wallets, cases, in every hue and style. What he saw was the sleek black dress, creamy white skin, shining red curls. He shook his head. “Focus,” he said to himself. Locking down Taylor would solidify his position with Freeman.

“Good morning.”

He looked up to see Anna in the doorway. She held two large coffee containers from Starbucks.

“We’re going to need better fuel than the dreck from the break room.”

He sighed. “Bless you.”

He watched as she closed the door and crossed the room. Tan slacks today, not her usual skirt. Was she hiding? It wasn't doing her any good because the tailor slacks curved her bottom perfectly. She wore a matching pullover sweater. Her curls were pinned at the

nape of her neck. She was covered almost completely from head to toe and he still couldn't take his eyes off her.

"A little more casual today," he said.

She tugged nervously at her sweater. "This is going to be a lot of work today. Searching in cabinets and I'm sure a couple of trips to the warehouse. I figured this was more appropriate."

She set the cup down in front of him and he covered her hand with his. "It was an observation, that's all."

"Oh." Her blush deepened.

Jim took a sip of the coffee. "Mmmm. Good choice. Okay, let's get started."

For the next twelve hours they debated and argued all while chugging the extra leaded coffee from down the block. He insisted on accompanying her to the warehouse, a point to which she argued furiously.

"I've been running across town to the warehouse for twenty years. What makes you think I can't find my way now?"

"I'm the new guy. I should see it too."

"It's just a warehouse and we don't have time for a tour."

Jim reached out for her hand as she reached for the office door. "I'm going." He was glad she stopped arguing. He didn't want to have to admit the real reason. If the looks from the bull pen were any indication Anna rarely wore clothes like this. He wasn't going to let the guys in the warehouse get an eyeful without him standing by her side.

"I can't believe we did it." Anna was sitting on the floor in a sea of discarded pages.

Jim closed the laptop and sat down next to her. "Neither can I. What time is it?"

She looked at her watch. "12:30."

"Sixteen hours but we did it."

"Yes, we did," Anna smiled. He liked that smile.

"Did we eat?"

Anna laughed and pointed to the open cartons on the filing cabinet. "Chinese, about six hours ago."

"Did I like it?"

"I guess not since you don't remember."

"My advanced years, you know."

"Oh yeah, you're the old guy. The only reason I'm still sitting on this floor is I don't think I can get up."

"Why don't we go out and get some real food?"

Anna looked up and smiled. "I'm too tired to move, let alone eat."

“Well then, I join you down here.” Jim folded his legs Indian style among the discarded revisions.

“Taylor’s going to love your presentation.”

“Our presentation. You know Taylor well enough to know what he will respond to and what will get me bounced out on my ass.”

Anna rifled through the discarded pages. “Don’t forget he hates suck ups. Acknowledge his yachting trophy but nothing over the top.”

Jim took the papers from her hand. “I know we’ve been over this a million times.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’re going to get this account back.” He traced the line of her jaw with his finger. “We make a good team.” He leaned in and kissed her, intending only the slightest of touch. It wasn’t enough. His hand slid from her face to bury itself in her thick curls. The kiss deepened. She hesitated. He thought for an instant he’d gone too far until her hand trailed up his chest.

Logic, reason and the very important presentation vanished. He leaned her back on the floor kissing her as his hands began to explore. He cupped her full breast. Her arms threaded around his neck, pulling him fully over her.

“I need to touch you,” he whispered. He took her deep kiss as ascent. His hand slipped under the thin sweater, feeling cool skin. He touched her soft belly, traveled up to crisp lace and softer, intoxicating skin. He slipped his fingers under the lace, coaxing out a hard nipple.

“Oh, God,” she whispered.

Her voice snapped him violently back to reality. “What the hell? On the floor? What am I doing?”

He lifted his head. “Anna, I didn’t mean for this to happen.” He saw a shadow of doubt cross her face. “No, No. Not that. I definitely want this...you. I didn’t mean for it to happen on my office floor. Someone could find us. The Ritz-Carlton is not far from here. It’s just that you are so lovely, and I am so...God, I’m behaving like a teenager.”

“Jim,” she smiled

“Yes?”

“The last person left here six hours ago. I locked the door behind them.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“Clever girl.” He smiled and ripped the sweater over her head.

“What the hell was she doing? Whatever it was it felt fantastic. All that was left of her clothes were her silk panties. He was still fully clothed, lying on top of her and it was the most erotic thing she’d ever felt. He kissed her neck, working his way down, suckled her breasts. His tongue trailed down further, kissed her belly. She felt his finger tug at the lace panties. Then he kissed her in a way she hadn’t been kissed in years. He used his tongue as expertly as he did on her mouth. Circling, licking, teasing. She heard a disembodied moan and she assumed it was her, but she couldn’t be sure. Then he suckled

as he had on her breasts. Somewhere deep in her toes the wave started, shooting swiftly up through her body, leaving her only to cry out his name.

She looked up and saw intense need. He shed his clothes without speaking. She watched, fascinated and breathless, as he revealed himself to her. All hard lines to counter her soft ones. She reached her arms up to him and he covered her. She opened to him and he entered her. They stilled, taking in the moment.

“Oh God, Anna,” he whispered.

She flexed her muscles gloving his shaft. The dance began, ancient, timeless, perfectly in tune. Finally, the wave engulfed them both.

“I suppose we should get up,” Jim said.

“I suppose so. People will eventually come back to work and this wouldn’t look good.”

“Christ,” Jim turned to her “Anna I...”

She shushed him with a kiss. “I wanted this as much as you did. We’re both grownup enough to admit that.”

He kissed her then glanced at his watch, the only thing left on his naked form. “You realize it’s nearly two a.m.?”

“Really?” Anna laughed. “I’m starving.”

“I know an all-night place that serves the best cheesecake in the city,” he replied.

“God, I love New York.” Anna reached for her underwear.

Chapter Twelve

The exhaustion had set in. Forty-nine-year-old bodies were not used to being kept up until four a.m. even if it was for mind blowing sex. After the cheesecake, which was, as promised, the best in the city, Jim escorted her home. Which led to sugar-fueled turbo charged sex – against the door, on the bathroom vanity and finally, blissfully, in her bed. Around six a.m. Jim woke and explained his retreat was due only to a need for a shower and a fresh suit. Then he made it clear he'd rather stay right where he was. He didn't leave Anna's apartment until seven.

Nine a.m. came with painful reality. She sat at her desk, of course, because she was never late. Her makeup was a little heavier thanks to the bags under her eyes.

Jim arrived at ten, showered, shaved and looking like a million bucks, damn him.

“Good morning, Anna.”

“Good morning, Jim.”

He shot her a wink and flushed red, looking for witnesses. Give me twenty minutes and then we'll take one last run through.”

“Sure.” Anna turned in her seat only to see Jessica standing in front of her.

“You did it?” she asked.

“What?” Anna's heart pounded.

“Finished the presentation for Taylor?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, her blood pressure slowing returning to normal.

“Do you think Taylor will go for it? I mean he’ll have to be a magician to pull this one off. Freddy really screwed up. I heard Taylor nearly decked him.”

“I think he’ll manage.” Anna couldn’t help but smile.

“What else do you think he’s going to manage?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re different. Your hair, the clothes are new and your make up is just about perfect.”

“Thank you, I think.”

“Are you trying to catch his eye?”

“What?” Anna could feel her cheeks heat.

“I like you Anna, I really do. I just don’t want to see you disappointed.”

“Why would I be disappointed?”

“Because Viki has decided he’s the latest and greatest and you know she always gets what she wants.”

Anna glanced over at what should be Viki’s occupied desk. She was late as usual. Victoria Whitehall Crane was the daughter of Freeman’s banker. Daddy dearest decided she should earn her pin money. Viki, as the chosen few called her, liked men, preferably older and preferably loaded. To that end she cultivated an air of metro-sophistication. She was uptown chic and she made damn sure everyone knew it. The hell of it was, when Viki

concentrated on her work, she was really good. Then she heard it, the oh-so cultured laugh. Viki wasn't late after all.

"I'm just trying to be a friend," Jessica lamented.

"No, you're not. You're Viki's wing man. You're gathering information while warning off what is apparently perceived competition, which is ridiculous. This is an office, not a singles bar. Get back to work, Jess."

Jessica flushed bright red and fled to her cubicle. Anna had always been friendly with the girls in the bullpen, but she's never made the mistake that they were her friends. Anna could feel the heat burning right up through her scalp, the curse of her Irish heritage. She grabbed her bag and dashed for the ladies' room. Unfortunately, between her office and the ladies room was the break room. The door was open. She heard the laugh. There was Viki, oh so young and beautiful, flipping the end of Jim's tie.

"Why Jim, you and I have barely had a chance to get to know each other."

"I've been rather busy"

"I've heard. Such the busy bee. The weekend is coming up and my father is having a dinner at Tavern on the Green. You should join us. He'd love to meet you."

"Ah...I'll have to get back to you."

Her heart sank to her toes. She fled past the open door and into the ladies' room. It was empty. Thank God for small favors. She locked herself in a stall and sat while silent tears fell on her new skirt. God, she was an idiot. What did she have to offer that Victoria Whitehall Crane didn't have in spades? Youth, money, youth. Damn. She blew her nose

on the thin tissue. Freeman was such a cheap bastard; couldn't he spring for the double ply?

She started to laugh. She couldn't help it. This was totally ridiculous. She was working on two hours sleep. She'd had a brief thing with a great guy, but no promises were made. They were adults. They could enjoy each other without commitments.

She opened the door, dried her eyes and repaired her makeup as best she could. She would go over the presentation and help Jim get Taylor back in the Barrow fold. That was all there was too it. She slipped her lip gloss back in her bag and stared at the tired face with now, very puffy eyes.

Crap! Jim thought he saw Anna's curls fly past the break room. All he wanted was another cup of coffee and what he got was solicited by the daughter of man who should have taught his girl some manners. He walked to the hallway. Damn it! Obsession. That was Anna's perfume. It lingered just enough for Jim to know she'd seen everything. He had to find her. He extricated himself from Viki's grasp and headed back to his office. At least he tried. Viki snapped at his heels like an over-bred Pomeranian. She slipped an arm through his, splashing some of his coffee on the carpet. "You'd love my daddy's parties. He knows absolutely everyone. We should get together for drinks first, get to know each other better."

Freeman appeared in his path. "Kelly, how the hell are you?" he said slapping his arm. He'd be lucky to get half a cup back to his office.

"I'm good Mr. Freeman."

Freeman glanced appraisingly at Viki. "Hello dear. How are we treating you?"

"Oh fine Mr. Freeman. Of course, Ms. O'Connell is quite the taskmaster, but I'm up to it."

"Bitch." Jim thought

Speaking of which, I'd better get back. Daddy's party starts at eight. Seven would be good for drinks.

They both watched as Viki wiggled her well formed ass back to her cubicle.

"Moving up in the world I see. Dinner with Crane is good for business." He elbowed him again. "And drinks with Viki is good for the johnson."

Freeman laughed deep as Jim turned to side step him. Anna was right behind him. That prick Freeman knew it.

"Anna I..."

"I'm ready to go over the presentation. I'll meet you in your office," she said much too quickly, dashing around both of them.

Freeman grabbed his arm. Jim threw what was left of his coffee down the water fountain.

"Viki Crane is the right kind of girl for you, Kelly. You work for Barrow now. You need to see and be seen. And doing it on the arm of someone like Viki Crane is the ticket." What passed for a smile crossed his face. "And she's a terrific lay."

If Jim had eaten breakfast it would be all over Freeman's Bruno Magli's. "Excuse me. I have a meeting in three hours. I need to get ready."

"Of course, of course. Business first."

Sanctuary – Jim closed the door to his office and sat behind his desk. No coffee and a very pissed off girlfriend. Was that what she was? Despite the full-on disaster that'd just happened, a smile played across his face as it always did when he thought of her. Colleague, friend, lover. So much more than a girl friend. And she was definitely no girl. His smile broadened just as Anna walked through the door.

Chapter Thirteen

She was desperate to stomp down the fury inside her. Viki Crane. It wasn't like Anna had a claim on him but really, Viki Crane? How Page Six. Now he's sitting behind his desk looking like Missy did after she'd devoured an entire can of tuna. Thirty years experience would win out over that uptown princess.

“Well, lets so our final run through.”

Jim leapt to his feet. “Anna it's not what you think.”

She held up a hand and gave him a well-practiced smile. “Jim, please its fine. Viki's a lovely girl.” (God, don't let me barf.) I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time. I understand her father's parties are quite the events.”

“I never accepted. She just assumed I did.”

“I'm sure you'll have a great time.”

“Damn it! I never said I was going.”

“You should. Freeman wants you there. You’ve pissed him off enough and you need to smooth things over. And every man in New York wants to be seen on the arm of Victoria Crane.”

“Not this man.” He moved in and took her by the shoulders. “You and I...”

Anna interrupted. “We had a great time. Fabulous cheesecake by the way. Now we really should get to the presentation.”

For the next hour Anna reviewed the slides, made sure he had the right samples and grilled him on the life history William Taylor. As she sent him off to the meeting she even brushed a piece of lint off his jacket. Completely through. Completely professional. Completely maddening.

It took every ounce of self-control he had to walk out of the office like nothing was wrong. He secured the sample bags in his trunk and tossed the laptop in the passenger seat.

He pounded the wheel. “Cheesecake? What the hell? We have world class sex for hours and hours and all she mentions is the cheesecake?” He blew his horn as a cab pulled out in front of him. “Asshole!” he screamed, confident no one would retaliate since his Lexus was all but sound proof. He stopped at the light and took a deep breath. He would have to focus. This was meeting was too important. But so was Anna, and he would deal with her too.

Anna hoped no one noticed her fingers shaking over her keyboard. Reviewing expense reports meant she could put her brain on auto-pilot. Thirty years experience would carry her through. Thirty years. Viki Crane wasn’t even a gleam in her father’s eye. Thirty

years ago, none of these girls were. They were young and pretty and fresh. That's the way Freeman liked it. "Puts a good face out there for Barrow," he liked to say. It also explained why "The Black Bash" was the first time Anna had ever encountered Freeman socially. To Freeman, Anna was like the old machinery it took to create Barrow leather. Necessary but not talked about and never, ever seen. Five more years of Freeman and Barrow and she could retire. To what, she wasn't quite sure. She'd have lots of time to read. Maybe she'd work with animals. Maybe she'd move to Europe. Her hands stopped moving. None of her musings of her future included anyone else. They hadn't for years. Jesus, she was turning into one of those old ladies people told jokes about, the little old lady with the cats. The kind of person no one ever missed when they were gone.

She turned her attention back to the screen. Dan Varsky should know better than to expense a room at the Hilton. Dan traveled all the time, on the west coast but he had an apartment in the Village. This receipt was for the Hilton on west forty-second street. If he was going to boink his girlfriend in the middle of the afternoon he could damn well pay for it himself.

It was three thirty. The meeting had to be over. Taylor would be halfway to the Hamptons by now. All that work. He'd come back to tell her, call, at least. He wouldn't leave her hanging? She'd kill him.

The elevator door opened, and Jim stepped out trailing a rolling luggage rack. On it were boxes with what must have been the samples he'd shown Taylor, his laptop and briefcase.

"Well?" her face lit up, momentarily forgetting she was royally pissed at him.

"My office," he said.

"Shit!" she thought. "What went wrong? I covered all his bases. I know I did." She closed the door behind her. "What happened?"

He turned to face her with a beaming smile. He held out the contract file she'd prepared. He flipped the pages until he flashed the William Taylor signature in bold, Mont Blanc strokes. She grabbed the file and flipped through.

"He went for everything!?" she squealed. "You did it!" She threw her arms around him and he quickly hugged her back.

"We did it. You gave me what I needed to make this happen."

She pulled back, flushed with embarrassment. "I was just doing my job."

"And to that end," he indicated she should sit. He handed her one of the smaller boxes from the rack. "Open it."

Inside was *the* Barrow Bag. Top of the line, butter soft black leather and worth a month's salary, even with her employee discount. Her heart pounded in her chest. "I don't understand."

"This is a thank you for a job well done."

She tried to squelch the rising flood of disappointment. "Thank you, Jim. It's not necessary."

“You do so much around here its time you were appreciated.”

She felt one step away from a gold watch and a rubber chicken dinner. She needed to leave, now. She stood and faced him smiling as best she could. “Thank you, Jim. I should get back to my desk and you’ll want to tell Mr. Freeman about the contract.”

“Freeman can wait. You have another box to open.” He pulled the second box off the rack. “The first was a gift from a grateful colleague. This gift is from Jim to Anna.”

She opened it and gasped. It was the Barrow overnighter. Matching the bag, it was compact, folding in half and resembled airline carry-on. It was popular with flight crews all over the world.

“Jim really...”

“Open it.”

She laid the bag on his desk and unzipped it and spread the sides apart. Inside was a lovely silk shift and matching duster jacket. There was a green cotton sweater and a pair of jeans. Tucked in the pockets were lingerie and toiletries.

“Now I really don’t understand,” she said.

“Anna, I have a room booked at the Ritz-Carleton for the weekend. I suggest you and I check in, have a few wonderful meals. Maybe see a show, and figure out what it is we have here.” He took her by the shoulders and placed the softest of kisses on her lips.

“Please say yes,” he whispered.

She couldn’t help but smile. “The clothes, they’re all my size.”

“You don’t spend thirty years in the rag trade without knowing a woman’s size.

“You think you’re so charming I won’t be able to resist.”

“Am I? he asked with all the concern of a child wondering if Santa was coming.

“Yes,” she barely whispered before he swept her in his arms and kissed her.

Chapter Fourteen

This was passion, full and real, all in one soul searing kiss. How had this happened? A week ago, she was an aging secretary with a cat and not much else. Now she was a woman in love.

They pulled apart both knowing there was a real world out there and it might not knock. Anna grabbed the contracts. "I'll get this stuff to legal."

"I'll tell Freeman the good news, then, we leave early."

"Early, both of us?" Everyone will know."

Jim smiled and everything in her world changed.

Anna went back to her desk with the file. Jim followed, setting her new bags behind her partition.

"Twenty minutes, thirty tops."

Anna just smiled as Jim walked toward Freeman's office. She couldn't believe she was about to leave the office early for a weekend tryst with her hot lover. "Yeah for me!" she thought. She flipped the pages off the file, making notes before forwarding it up to legal.

"Jim looks happy."

Anna's head snapped up. Viki was standing in front of her desk. "Did you want something?"

She toyed with the edge of her long blond hair. "No, I'm just waiting for Jim. We're going to Daddy's party tonight."

Anna studied the young girl for a moment. That's what she was, young and naive despite her lifestyle. How could she feel threatened by this girl?

"No, you're not," Anna said calmly.

"What?" Viki flushed bright red. No one ever told Victoria Crane no.

"You're working this weekend." Anna reached into her stack of files and pulled out one labeled *'Fall Trends'*. It was Viki's job to track the latest and greatest from the hottest designers. From her social position it should have been easy to do. Anna had clipped to the file a red-carpet picture of Viki carrying the competition's product.

"This report is crap and you know it. And what the hell is this?" she said pointing to the bag. "Be grateful Freeman didn't see it. You work for Barrow and everyone knows it. You can't be seen carrying the competition."

"You're not carrying Barrow," she said pointing to Anna's dated purse.

"I wasn't being photographed at a Broadway opening."

"Even if you were, who would know who you are?"

"That's enough, Viki. Anyone else would fire you for that remark. I won't."

She pushed out her slightly quivering chin. "My Daddy's too important to Barrow."

"I don't give a damn who your father is. I'm not firing you and you are going to work the entire weekend if you have to." Anna thrust the report in her hands.

“Why should I?”

“Because you’re better than this,” she said tapping on the file. Viki looked shocked.

“You have a keen eye and a quick mind. You’re smart, smarter than anyone gives you

credit for, except me. I know what you’re capable of and I expect better of you. I’ll expect that report on my desk Monday morning and it damn well better be perfect.”

“And if its not?”

“You won’t be making a lot of parties until it is.” Anna held her gaze. “Viki, you can do this. I have faith in you.”

A look came over Viki’s face, a softness she’d never seen before. “Okay,” she said quietly. She turned towards her desk, then stopped. “You’re different than you used to be.”

“No, it’s the same old me. You just never noticed before.” Anna smiled, and Viki nodded as she returned to her desk.

Chapter Fifteen

The caller ID said it was an internal call. “Yes Mr. Freeman?”

“Can you come in, Anna?”

“I’ll be right there.” Out of habit she grabbed a pad and pen. She knocked softly and waited.

“Come in.”

Freeman sat behind his massive mahogany desk in his oversized leather chair. He was doing something that always left her feeling uneasy. He was smiling.

“Sit Anna, sit.” He indicated one of the leather armchairs in front of his desk. Jim occupied the other.

Freeman leaned back in his chair. “Jim was telling me what an asset you were on the Taylor account.” He laughed. John Freeman looked happy, like Pamela Anderson had just accepted a date. “Got the whole damn account back and then some. I can’t freaking believe it. I was sure Freddie had blown it but good.”

“Well sir, I...”

Jim reached over and touched her hand. She looked into his eyes and somehow saw what he saw. She turned to Freeman. “Jim and I made a good team.” Jim smiled.

“I would say so. I don’t need to tell you Anna that losing an account like Taylor would have devastated our fiscal year. I’d have to make layoffs, cutbacks. First time in Barrow history, and that would-be hell on our image let alone our bottom line.”

Anna nodded. She couldn’t believe Freeman was telling her all this. She knew it was true, but Freeman never admitted weakness, ever.

“Jim thinks you’d be able to help the other reps in the same way.”

She glanced over at Jim and smiled. Returning her attention to Freeman she leaned back in her chair. “Yes, I could, as Director of Operations.”

She heard Jim stifle a laugh.

“John, I’ve been doing the job for years. Its time I have the title, don’t you think?”

“Well, I suppose...”

“And the office to go with it.”

“The office next to mine appears to be empty,” Jim offered.

“I guess we could...”

Anna’s heart was pounding but something had taken over, the part of her that wanted more, more of everything in life. The part she’d been ignoring for twenty years.

“Of course, we’ll need to discuss a new compensation package.”

Freeman laughed. “Okay, Okay. I’ll have something worked up for you on Monday. Good enough?”

Anna nodded. “Good enough.”

Jim and Anna left Freeman's office and she promptly fell against the wall. "Oh my God! I can't believe I did that."

Jim took her by the shoulders. "I'd say it's about time."

She looked up into the sea green eyes she adored and smile. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"Okay, enough work for one week. We're out of here."

"Jim, I don't know...."

"Anna, you were fearless in there. Don't back down now."

"Get your bags, New Guy."

Jim laughed and dashed to his office. Anna shut down her computer and began gathering up her things, including the new Barrows.

"Leaving early?" asked Jessica, who had magically appeared next to her desk.

"Yes, I am."

"You never leave early."

"There's a first time for everything."

Jim joined her, trench coat, briefcase, and matching overnighter in hand. Jessica looked back and forth. Taking his cue from the blush on Jessica's face, he turned to Anna.

"Ready, darling?"

Anna turned and smiled. "Yes. Yes I am."

They retreated to the elevator before Jessica could form a new sentence. "You realize of course you just outed us to the entire company."

He brushed a fingertip down her cheek and placed a soft kiss on her lips. “Yes, I know.”

“How did this happen? she asked. “A week ago, we didn’t even know each other, now...”

“Now you’re the Director of Operations of a major fashion company and were off for a weekend together.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know, Anna. Fate, karma, destiny, take your pick.” he said.

She looked into his eyes and smiled. “Magic.”