

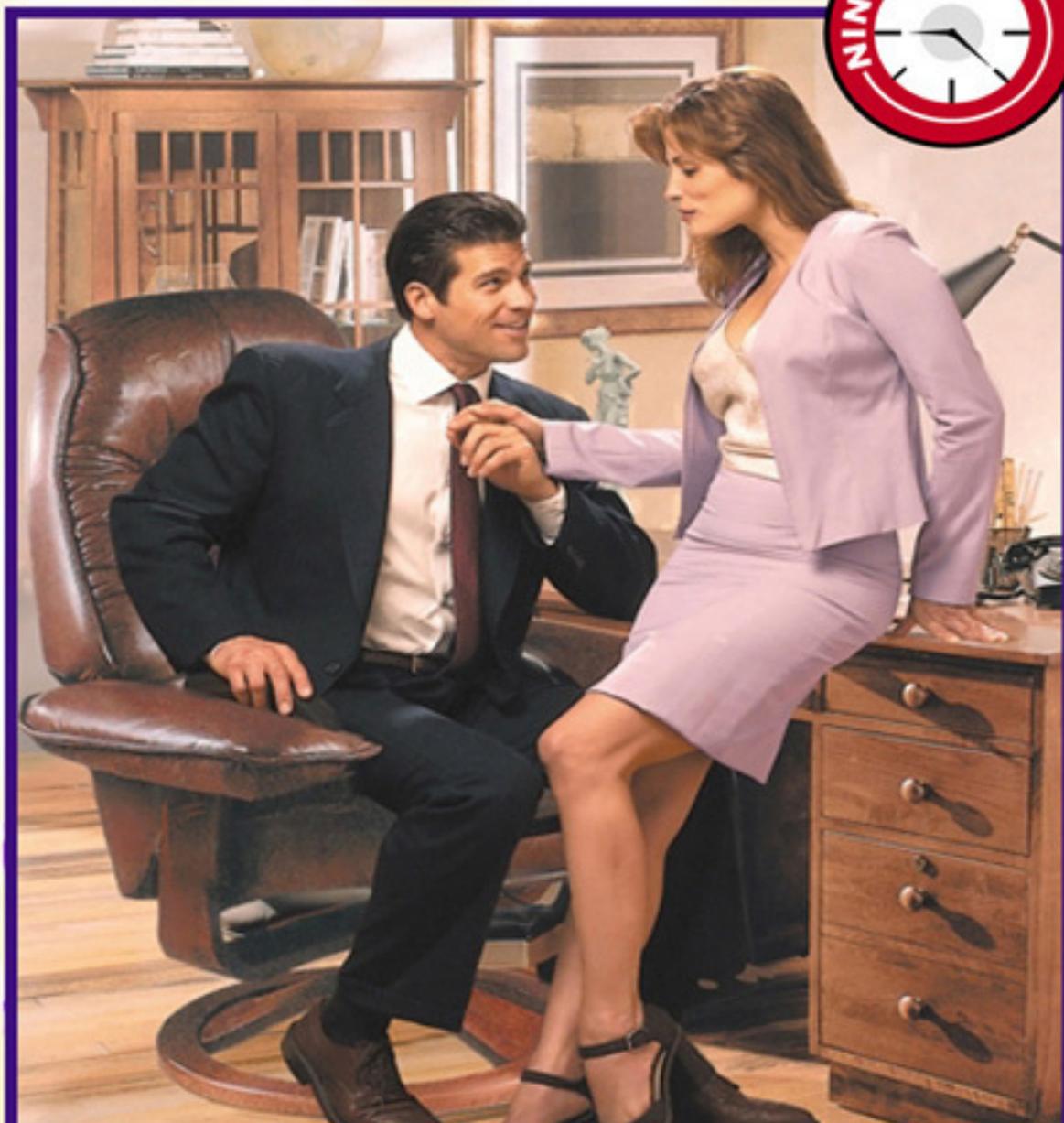
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THE BOSS'S DAUGHTER

Leigh Michaels



Leigh Michaels
The Boss's Daughter

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Being the boss's daughter was tough—especially when Amy found herself temporarily in charge of the company! Worse, her "assistant" was the extremely handsome, dynamic Dylan Copeland. He was so insistent on keeping an eye on her that Amy began to wonder exactly who was in charge! But was Dylan getting so close to Amy for professional or personal reasons? The man gave nothing away and Amy wasn't sure if it was ambition or seduction on his mind! And, working side by side, things were reaching boiling point....

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Leigh Michaels has written almost seventy novels for Harlequin Romance®. Her sparkling, warmly emotional style has captivated readers around the world, and she has over thirty million books in print. Translated into more than twenty languages, her stories feature characters that women everywhere, from all nationalities, can relate to—and enjoy reading time and again!

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CHAPTER ONE

AMY hesitated outside her father's hospital room. Then she took a deep breath and pushed the door open. No matter what Gavin Sherwood wanted to tell her, she knew that delaying wouldn't make it any easier to take, so she might just as well get it over with.

Inside the room, she paused to look at the man lying propped up in the hospital bed, surrounded by high-tech equipment. There was less machinery now than there had been three days ago, when she'd seen him in the intensive care unit right after his heart attack. He was still very ill, there was no denying that. But his color was better, and he was no longer nearly as fragile-looking as he had been a few days before. He was going to make it.

So whatever Gavin had on his mind, Amy told herself, she would listen patiently and politely and then do precisely as she pleased. She wouldn't exactly blow a raspberry at him, of course, no matter what he said—because he was still her father. But she wasn't going to be manipulated into making any deathbed promises to a man who clearly wasn't on his deathbed.

Gavin opened his eyes. "You finally got my message, I see."

He sounded a little querulous, Amy thought, and his voice hadn't yet regained all its power—or perhaps the feeble quaver was intentional.

Amy moved closer to the bedside. "Message? It sounded more like a summons to me."

"Took you long enough to get here. Where have you been? Out all night?"

As if he has any right to ask. "No, I got up early and went out for a walk. What is it you want, Gavin?"

"It's a bit involved, I'm afraid. Sit down, Amy."

"No, thanks. I didn't come for a leisurely chat, and I'd just as soon not be here when your fiancée gets back from the cafeteria or wherever she's gone."

"Honey went home for a while."

Amy lifted an eyebrow. So she could rest, or so you could? she wanted to ask.

"This has been an ordeal for her."

"She was obviously under a lot of stress the night you came into the hospital," Amy agreed. In fact, she seemed to regard your illness as a great personal inconvenience.

"She's very young," Gavin Sherwood said quietly. "She's never faced serious illness before in anybody she truly cares about."

And perhaps she still hasn't. Amy's tongue was getting sore from biting it, but she knew better than to say what she thought. Her father was already quite aware that his soon-to-be trophy wife was a major thorn in his daughter's side, so it was unnecessary—and hardly sporting—for Amy to take cheap shots at Honey's expense. Even more important, if she kept criticizing Honey, her opposition would only drive Gavin into defending his choice, further deepening the chasm between father and daughter.

But as long as Honey wouldn't be popping in at any moment, she might as well make herself comfortable, Amy decided, and pulled up a chair. "So what did you want to talk to me about? The message you left on my answering machine wasn't exactly chatty."

"The nurses were hanging around when I called. How's the job hunt coming along?"

"Quite well, thanks. Which I could have told you on the phone. So why was it so important that I drive over here?"

Gavin's fingers plucked at the sheet. "My doctor says I can be released from the hospital in a few days. But of course I'm still facing a long recovery. I won't be able to do much for myself at first."

"I'm sure Honey will make a terrific nurse," Amy said firmly. "It'll give her a preview of the real meaning of 'for better or for worse.' And she looks stunning in white."

"That's not what I'm concerned about. Of course she'll be there for me."

I hope you're right, Amy wanted to say.

"It's the auction house, you see. My doctor says I can't go back to work for several weeks, so someone will have to step in, and of course you're the obvious choice..." His voice trailed off as he looked up at her.

Amy was already shaking her head, and her voice was steady. "I don't work there anymore, Gavin. Remember?"

"Officially you're still on a leave of absence, you know."

"I told you I quit, and I meant it. It was your choice not to accept my resignation."

Gavin didn't seem to hear her. "And if it hadn't been for that silly misunderstanding, you would still be there. So it's only sensible that you come back and—"

"Silly misunderstanding? I walked into your office and found you on the couch with Honey, and you call it a silly misunderstanding?"

"Of course you were upset, Amy."

"Darn right I was. Remember? That was the first clue I had that you were planning to divorce my mother."

"I know. And I truly wish you hadn't found out that way."

"That," Amy said tersely, "makes two of us."

"But to actually leave your job, to turn your back on the family business, over something like that... Honestly, Amy, now that you've had a chance to cool off and think it over, don't you agree that you were being a little excessive?"

Amy considered. "Yes," she said finally. "I was a little excessive. I should have gone back to my desk and written you a polite resignation letter instead of screaming 'I quit!' at the top of my lungs in the middle of the executive suite while Honey was still trying to get her sweater back on. My technique left a lot to be desired, I admit—put it down to the shock of the situation. But if you're asking whether I have regrets over my decision—no, I don't. After a display of that sort of bad judgment, I'd have trouble trusting any boss."

Gavin looked at her shrewdly. "You can't expect me to believe that you don't miss the auction house."

He was right about that, Amy conceded. She couldn't honestly say that she didn't miss Sherwood Auctions. She'd worked in her father's business, in one capacity or another, ever since she could remember. Before she was a teenager, she'd been running errands, cleaning offices, watching the cloakroom. Later she'd moved up to writing catalog copy, spotting bids during auctions, and researching merchandise. And as soon as she had her degree she'd joined the full-time staff, though she'd still moved from department to department—taking a hand wherever she was needed.

Leaving a firm which had occupied so much of her life wouldn't have been easy under any circumstances, but that fact didn't mean she was sorry she'd done it. Once she was finally settled in a new job, she'd be contented again.

"It was time for a change, and I'm looking forward to new challenges." She knew she sounded evasive.

Gavin bored in. "Doing what?"

"I'm not absolutely certain yet. But just because I haven't accepted a job doesn't mean I don't have any prospects."

"But the bottom line is that you're still out of work," Gavin mused. "Even after more than two months of looking."

"Blame yourself for that, because you paid me well enough that I could take my time and look around instead of jumping at the first possibility. And if you're speculating on why no one seems to want me—as a matter of fact, it looks as if I'm going to have three different offers any day now. Good offers, too. I'll have a hard time figuring out which one I want to take."

Gavin said slowly, “And each of them will give you a big change and a new challenge? Is that really what you want, Amy?”

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry, but—” She could afford to be gentle, now that he finally seemed to be hearing her.

“That’s exactly why you should come back and run the auction house instead,” Gavin pointed out brightly. “That’ll be a big change and a new challenge, too, because you’ve always worked in the separate departments. You’ve never before tried being in charge of everything.”

“And that’s why I’m the wrong person for the job. You’ve got a personal assistant who already oversees all the details. Why not promote him?”

“His name isn’t Sherwood.”

“So maybe he’ll change it if you ask him nicely.”

Gavin looked at her narrowly. “You still haven’t forgiven me for hiring Dylan instead of giving you the job, have you, Amy?”

“Where did you get that delusion? I didn’t want to be a glorified secretary, making phone calls and excuses.”

“Dylan is not a glorified secretary.”

“Great. If he’s been so involved in the business, he’s capable of taking over for a while. I don’t know why you wanted a personal assistant in the first place if you aren’t going to use him to advantage.”

“Dylan is very good,” Gavin said, but Amy thought the tone of his voice sounded far less certain than the words. “But you know how personal the auction business is. It’s a matter of trust, and I’ve worked for decades to build up that trust. My clients trust Sherwood Auctions because they trust me.”

“So if you’re saying that no one can take your place, Gavin, what’s the point of asking me to try?”

“Because the next best thing to the Sherwood they’re familiar with is a different Sherwood. It’s just the same as when my father handed the business down to me, back when we were still selling farm machinery and odds and ends instead of antiques and fine art. His clients were willing to give me a try, because I was his son. And you don’t only have the name, Amy, and the instincts—you’ve got twenty years of experience in the business.”

“Only if you count when I was six years old and I handed out catalogs to bidders as they came into the auctions,” Amy muttered. “I had to stand on a chair.”

Gavin smiled. “And our auctions in those days were still small enough that a child could handle the weight of a stack of catalogs.”

“Nostalgia is not going to change my mind, Gavin. Give your personal assistant a chance. If this hadn’t happened, you’d have counted on him to keep the place running while you were on your honeymoon. What’s so different about letting him take over now? It’s just a little longer, that’s all.” Amy stood up and firmly changed the subject. “Speaking of honeymoons, is the date firm yet? Though I suppose it would be chancy to choose a day for the wedding before the divorce is final.”

Gavin didn’t seem to hear her. His hand went out to clutch at her sleeve. “All right. I didn’t want to tell you this, Amy, but I suppose I don’t have a choice.”

Now what was he going to try? Hadn’t he already run the gamut of persuasive techniques?

“You know, of course, about the financial settlement your mother and I have agreed to as part of the divorce.”

“I know you made an agreement,” Amy said slowly. “She didn’t give me the details, and I didn’t think it was any of my concern as long as Mother was satisfied.”

“Well, that’s the problem, you see. She may not be satisfied for much longer.”

Amy sat down again. “Perhaps you’d better take this from the top, Gavin.”

“We agreed to split our assets as equally as possible. After being married so many years, I felt it was the only arrangement that was fair to Carol.”

“Also the only arrangement she’d have accepted, considering that you were the one who wanted out of the marriage,” Amy said, almost under her breath.

“But it was impossible to split everything straight down the middle. For instance, Carol wanted the house and I—of course—wanted to keep the business. But because the values of those two things weren’t anywhere near equal, I agreed to make her a lump sum payment as compensation for her share of Sherwood Auctions. It’s quite a large amount, and it’s due pretty soon.”

“If you’re threatening to withhold that payment unless I cooperate,” Amy said, “you’d better think again.”

“I’m not trying to blackmail you, Amy.” Gavin fidgeted a little. “The fact is I can’t pay Carol, because I don’t have the money. My expenses these last few months have been heavier than I anticipated. All the attorneys’ fees, you know.... I’ve ended up paying your mother’s as well as my own, and the legal bills are still coming in. And of course it isn’t cheap setting up a new apartment from scratch.”

“To say nothing of the cost of tickets for a honeymoon in Italy,” Amy agreed. Poor Daddy—Honey’s obviously been a lot more expensive than you anticipated.

“It isn’t as if I haven’t been working on it,” Gavin said. He sounded almost defensive. “There are a number of potential clients I’ve been working on for some time. You know the routine, Amy—it takes people time to decide to part with treasures they’ve collected. Time, and gentle handling, because they have to be comfortable with the decision. I was planning to see several of those people again in the next couple of weeks because I think they’re ready to confirm some deals. But then this happened.” He waved a hand at the machinery that surrounded him. “And I’m stuck.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll be making any goodwill calls for a while,” Amy agreed.

“Without the personal approach, those people are likely to change their minds altogether, or else take their business to another auction house. I can’t really blame them for thinking that they might not get the kind of attention at Sherwood that they would if I was there.” He shot a sideways look at her. “Unless you take over, Amy. Because you’re my heir, you see, the reputation of the firm is just as important to you as it is to me, so you’ll work just as hard to uphold it.”

“Or at least the clients will believe that,” Amy murmured. “How could they possibly know the truth?—that Dylan is probably a lot more concerned about the reputation of the auction house than I am. It’s his bread and butter, after all—not mine. Not anymore.”

“You already know, Amy, that perception is everything in this business. What the clients believe is important. And in any case, it’s true—you’ve lived and breathed the auction business all your life, my dear, and whatever you say, you don’t want to see it destroyed. All I’m asking is a few more weeks. And it’s really more for your mother’s sake than mine.”

Cunning of him, to put it that way. Amy shrugged. “Now that’s a thought. You could just turn the business over to Mother for a while. After all, she’s lived and breathed it even longer than I have, and with her financial future at stake—”

Gavin’s eyebrows tilted. “You’re joking, surely.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I am,” Amy admitted. “But couldn’t you just talk to her? Explain what’s happened?”

Gavin shook his head. “I can’t see her being very understanding. And I can’t blame her, exactly—I got myself into this predicament.”

He was no doubt right about his soon-to-be-ex-wife’s lack of sympathy, Amy thought. Who could blame Carol Sherwood for still being furious over her ex-husband’s behavior? Amy didn’t think her mother would actually be shortsighted enough to put revenge ahead of her own financial interests. But Amy could understand why Gavin was hesitant to confess his predicament to Carol. If she did become vindictive, she’d be within her rights to demand her money even if it required Gavin to liquidate everything he owned, and he didn’t want to take the slightest chance of having that happen.

“And postponing the payment for a few weeks wouldn’t help much anyway,” Gavin said heavily, “if the business I’ve cultivated so carefully goes somewhere else in the meantime.”

Amy sighed. “All right. I’ll see what I can do.”

Gavin gripped her hand. “That’s my girl,” he said. “I knew I could count on you.”

Amy paused for a full fifteen seconds on the sidewalk, looking up at the block-square brown-brick building—originally a warehouse—that housed her father’s auction business, before she took a deep breath and pulled open the main door.

It had been nearly three months since she had set foot inside Sherwood Auctions, and just an hour ago, she’d have sworn that she would never walk through those doors again. But here she was anyway—pretty much resigned to the fact, if not precisely happy about it.

She stopped in the small entrance lobby. The half-dozen comfortable chairs opposite the reception desk were all empty, but that wasn’t unusual. It wasn’t exactly early, but the auction business didn’t really get moving till at least the middle of the day.

Behind the reception desk, a man in a dark suit was on the telephone, obviously scheduling an appointment for the caller with one of the auction house’s expert appraisers. That might take a while, Amy knew. Though she tapped the toe of her sandal on the marble floor, the action was more to give her something to do than because she was feeling impatient.

“Mrs. Gleason will see you on Thursday morning at ten,” the man at the desk said. “Thank you for calling Sherwood Auctions, Mrs. Carter.” He stood up. “Good morning. How may I help —” His question broke off abruptly as he got a good look at Amy, and he went on disbelievingly, “Ms. Sherwood?”

She didn’t blame him for being startled. “In the flesh, Robert.”

“But your father isn’t—” He sounded a bit apprehensive. “I mean, you do know about...don’t you?”

“About his heart attack? Relax, I haven’t been that far out of the loop. I just came from seeing him in the hospital. I’m here because...” She paused. Because I’m taking over. She hadn’t even said it out loud to herself, and at the last moment she realized she couldn’t get her tongue around the words to explain it to anyone else just yet. Not till she’d had a little more time to get used to the idea herself. So instead of telling Robert the truth, she said, “Because I need to see Beth Gleason. Has she come in yet?”

Robert nodded. “Go on up, Ms. Sherwood.” He pushed a button on the desk and the inner door unlocked with a soft buzz.

Amy was just a little startled that he hadn’t phoned Beth to come down to greet her. No one but the staff was supposed to wander around the building without an escort. In fact, considering the way Amy had departed almost three months ago, she wouldn’t have been too surprised if instead of casually letting her enter, Robert had vaulted the reception desk, seized her by the neck, and thrown her out onto the street. Even if her father had sentimentally left her name on the employee roster, the rest of the staff had to know the truth.

Amy stepped through the doorway and into the main lobby. While the reception area was elegant in a very understated way, the two-story-high lobby on the other side of the locked door—where no client or bidder or visitor ever went without an escort—had been deliberately designed to overwhelm. Though it contained nothing but a branching staircase with a cloakroom tucked underneath and a matched pair of elevators, the room often drew gasps from the first-time visitor. Quite an understandable reaction, Amy had always thought, since the staircase had been salvaged from a centuries-old manor house, the linen-fold paneling which covered the elevator doors from a minor palace, and the arched ceiling from a small cathedral. None of them were the sort of thing often seen in Kansas City.

Perception is everything in this business, Gavin had said, and he was right. It had cost him a fortune to create the image of a solid, wealthy, timeless business, but the investment had more than

paid for itself. When clients who had been doubtful about what to do with their treasures saw this lobby, they abruptly relaxed, certain that they and their possessions were in good hands. Amy had seen it happen a hundred times.

She could have taken the elevator from the lower lobby all the way to the top of the building where the executive offices were located, but she much preferred to climb the stairs as far as she could. She liked to let her hand trail along the satin-smooth railing as she climbed, liked to see the view from the top step as a second and even larger lobby opened out in front of her. To one side, across what seemed an acre of carpet, was a pillared archway leading into the auction room where the rare and unusual items that were Sherwood Auctions' specialty were put under the hammer. On the other side of the lobby, smaller doors led into a series of museum-like showrooms where prospective buyers could inspect the merchandise days or even weeks before the actual auction.

This morning the auction room was empty and the showrooms quiet. Amy paused just long enough to glance into the showrooms before she went on upstairs. The next scheduled auction, she concluded, must be furniture, for a classic highboy occupied the place of honor just inside the main showroom.

Upstairs, where the clients seldom came, the image of ancient success abruptly gave way to practicality. The fourth floor was a warren of offices, storage closets, and workrooms; she walked down two long corridors before stopping to tap at the door of a cramped office. A young woman wearing a lab coat and white cotton gloves looked up from a china figurine standing on her desk, her mouth dropping open as she saw Amy.

"Sevres?" Amy asked, pointing at the figurine.

Beth Gleason stripped off her gloves. "No. Unfortunately, it's just a darn good imitation."

"And now you have to break the news to the owner, who expected to make a small fortune on it?"

"My favorite part of the job," Beth said dryly. "What are you doing here? You told me you'd only come back over your father's..." Her voice trailed off. "Sorry. That's not very funny just now."

"Well, he's not dying. In fact, for a guy who had a heart attack just a few days ago, he's looking incredibly good." Amy brushed packing fibers off a chair and sat down. "He wants me back on the payroll, only this time I'm supposed to run the whole show."

"Take Gavin's place? For how long?"

"Until he's able to work again. A few weeks, he said."

Beth picked up a box and nestled the pseudo-Sevres figurine into it. "It makes a lot of sense," she said slowly.

Amy's jaw dropped. "From whose point of view? I've spent more than two months cultivating new job possibilities, but now that I'm finally getting nibbles you think I should be pleased about turning them all down so I can fill in for my father?"

"If the people who have offered you jobs really want you, surely they'll wait. A few weeks, you said? They'd have to wait that long if they hired someone who had to give notice before leaving a job."

"The museum would wait," Amy mused. "And probably the college, too. But the magazine... I don't think the editor of *Connoisseur's Choice* will have much patience, and I can't blame him. He needs a replacement for his roving expert before long."

Beth shot her a shrewd look. "So you have made up your mind which job you want."

Amy frowned. "I guess I have," she said slowly. "I didn't even know that I was leaning in that direction, until it was snatched away from me."

"So you're going to come back?"

"Do I have a choice? He's still my father." There was no need to go into the rest of it, she thought. The Sherwoods' divorce settlement was not the world's business.

"Talk to the people at the magazine. You might be surprised." Beth sealed the box with tape and set it aside. "Or maybe there's another way. Something you haven't thought of yet."

“Like turning myself into twins?” Amy said.

She went on up to the sixth floor, to the corner occupied by the executive offices. The lights were on, but the rooms seemed to be empty. Her father’s personal assistant was nowhere to be seen. Amy hesitated outside the half-open door of Gavin Sherwood’s corner office, remembering what had happened the last time she had come into this room. Her father, with Honey... The scene had scorched itself into her mind, and it still had the power to make her face burn with anger and embarrassment.

Don’t dwell on it, she told herself. It’ll only make the job harder. She gave the door a push and went inside. Two feet into the room, she stopped dead.

Behind her father’s enormous desk sat a man, dark head bent over an open drawer. Even half-hidden as he was by the desk, there was no mistaking the power and fitness of that lean frame. He looked up almost casually as she came in, but as his gaze fell on Amy, she thought she saw his body tighten, as if every muscle was coiling, ready for action.

Was he surprised to see her, then? If he hadn’t been warned, he must be even more startled at her sudden appearance than Robert and Beth had been. After all, neither Robert nor Beth had actually been a witness to that climactic confrontation between Amy and her father, while Dylan Copeland had.

Or perhaps he wasn’t surprised that she’d turned up, but he was bracing himself for what she might do.

Dylan stood up slowly, with a grace which looked effortless. He was tall and broad-shouldered, but the fact that he’d discarded his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt emphasized his powerful build and made her feel very fragile. Or was that just her imagination at work?

Not that she was fantasizing about Dylan Copeland’s body, Amy told herself tartly. Any inclination she might ever have had in that direction had dissipated within a week of his coming to work for Gavin—when it became apparent that Amy amused rather than intrigued him. It was just the uncomfortable position she’d suddenly found herself in that was making her feel so brittle, not some overwhelming masculine appeal of Dylan’s.

“Good morning, Amy,” he said mildly. “It’s a surprise to see you here. Last time you set foot in this office, you told your father you wouldn’t be back until hell froze over.”

“Is that what I said? I didn’t remember, exactly.”

“Not a very original expression, I must say. I was disappointed in you, because even under those circumstances I expected you to come up with something much more striking. But it seemed to make your point adequately.”

“And of course you were listening to every word.”

“I could hardly help it,” Dylan pointed out. “People in west Texas might have had to strain to hear you, but for anyone who was closer than that it was no effort at all. Have a seat and tell me why you’ve come back.” He sat down again.

“You weren’t expecting me?” Amy walked across the room and perched on the corner of the desk closest to him, pushing aside a pre-Columbian statuette that her father used as a paperweight. She’d chosen the position very carefully, so she could look down at him. “I thought perhaps Gavin had phoned to warn you I was on my way, and you’d come in to clear out the personal things that you’d already moved into his desk.”

“I see you still have an imagination. What a nice picture you’ve created of me—the moment I heard your father was tethered to a heart monitor, I made a slick play for his job.” He leaned back in Gavin Sherwood’s chair, appearing completely at ease.

“You’re twisting my words. That’s not what I meant.”

“Wasn’t it?” he said dryly. “So you’re here to take over. And whose idea was that, I wonder. Hasn’t the job hunt been successful?”

He’s just trying to needle you, Amy told herself. And he’s succeeding. “Are you volunteering to advise me about which offer I should accept? Because if that’s the case, I should warn you—”

“That you’d rather flip a coin, I suppose.”

“Coins don’t have enough sides.”

His dark eyebrows arched. “More than two? You are in demand, I see.”

Amy held up a finger. “One, the art museum is considering me for a position as assistant curator in the textiles division.”

“Only an assistant?” Dylan murmured. “I’m disappointed.”

Amy ignored him and put up a second finger. “Two, I’ll probably be asked to join the art faculty at the college.”

“You should hold out for the dean’s job.”

She waggled her hand at him, three fingers extended. “And third, I could be the new roving expert for Connoisseur’s Choice.”

“A stuffy old magazine about antiques and collectibles.” Dylan shrugged. “No wonder you’re coming back here instead.”

“Look,” Amy said. “It’s already apparent that you’ve got a chip on your shoulder about me being here. So let’s get one thing straight. It wasn’t my idea to come back, because I don’t want this job. As far as I’m concerned, Gavin should have turned the whole works over to you till he’s back on his feet. You’ve been his personal assistant for six months now, and if you can’t run this business on your own for a while he ought to fire you.”

“Thank you,” Dylan said.

His tone was meek, but Amy saw a glint in his eyes that she thought must have been anger. But why should she be surprised? Of course he was irritated that Gavin had preferred to trust her—despite her long absence from the business—instead of him. And since Gavin wasn’t around, of course Dylan was taking that irritation out on her.

“At least,” he went on, “I think there may have been a compliment buried somewhere underneath all that.”

Amy wasn’t listening. She had suddenly remembered what Beth had said—Maybe there’s another way.

And maybe she didn’t have to turn herself into twins in order to have it all.

“I’ve got a proposition for you,” she said suddenly.

Dylan looked around the room. “Perhaps there’s something in the ventilating system,” he mused. “Because propositions seem to be part of the atmosphere in this office.”

Amy willed herself not to turn pink. “I’m certainly not talking about Honey’s kind of proposition. Gavin’s got a fixation that I’m the only one who can run this place, which is absurd.”

Dylan didn’t speak, but she thought she saw a gleam of agreement in his eyes.

“But frankly, I have a lot of things I’d rather do. So let’s make a deal. I’ll be enough of a figurehead to keep Gavin happy, but you’ll be the boss in everything but name. You can run the place as you see fit, I’ll go take on my new job, and we’ll both have what we want.”

Dylan was shaking his head.

“Why not?” Amy asked crossly. “If you’re holding out for the title of acting CEO, believe me, I’d give it to you if I could.”

“Titles never appealed to me much. And I’m not fond of being a sacrificial lamb, either.”

Amy gasped. “What on earth—”

“This plan of yours is a pretty nice setup—for you, that is. If I pull it off, you get the credit. But if I don’t, you can tearfully confess to your father that it wasn’t your fault because I was really the one at the helm all along.”

“He’d be furious at me for ignoring his wishes and putting you in charge.”

“Not as angry as he’d be if you screwed things up personally. No, Ms. Sherwood, you’re not dumping this one on me. Because if you try, I’ll hand you my keys—and quit.” He rocked a little farther back in the chair. “So what are we going to do about it?”

CHAPTER TWO

AMY felt as if he'd picked up the pre-Columbian statuette from her father's desk and hit her over the head with it.

She stared at Dylan, unwilling to believe she'd heard him correctly. But his voice had been firm and absolutely level. He meant exactly what he'd said...or else he was the best poker player Amy had ever run into.

What would happen if she called his bluff? Or at least let him know that she wasn't entirely convinced he was willing to burn his bridges so completely?

She smiled. "You won't quit."

His eyes narrowed, but his tone was cordial. "If you think I'm joking, try me."

"I don't believe you'd desert my father while he's ill—and if you quit on me, it's just the same as abandoning him."

Dylan looked at her with a gleam of admiration in his dark-blue eyes. "You're almost as good a manipulator as Gavin is, you know."

"Besides, you can't just walk away from this job. Okay, maybe you're not charmed by the terms I'm talking about, but that's perfectly understandable. I'm not delighted with them, either. But—"

"Get one thing through your head, dear. I don't want your father's job any more than you do."

Doubt crept into Amy's mind. "Don't call me dear," she said automatically.

"Why shouldn't I? If we're not going to be working together—"

"But you'd be crazy to quit now. You've put six months into this job, and by now you must be thinking of how you'd run the business if it was left in your hands. Any red-blooded male would. And this is your opportunity to prove yourself."

Dylan shrugged. "I don't happen to have anything to prove."

"But you can't quit."

"Of course I can. Your father hired me, Amy. He didn't purchase me."

Amy's doubts were rapidly being overwhelmed by panic. Even though she'd suggested to Gavin that he could rely completely on his assistant, she hadn't realized how much she herself had depended on Dylan to be there as a sort of safety net. Even before she'd had the brainstorm of letting him take over entirely, she'd counted on him to lend her a hand, to bring her up to speed after her long absence.

It was bad enough that she was having to take over for her father at all. But it had never occurred to her that she might have to do it entirely by herself.

She'd been prepared for Dylan to resent her being boosted above him on the management ladder. She'd have bet her next paycheck—wherever it might come from—that he was too competitive not to object when he was passed over, especially in favor of a woman who had been gone so long she might as well be an outsider. But even then it had never occurred to her that he might actually quit.

"It never crossed my mind," she said almost to herself, "that you might not even be ambitious enough to want Gavin's job."

Only when she saw his eyes grow chilly did she realize that it might not have been a wise thing to say. Come to that, she reflected, she didn't entirely believe it even now.

But whatever his reasons were, they didn't matter at the moment—because she simply couldn't let him leave. At the same time, she could hardly let him see how desperate she was to have him stay, or he'd be waving a resignation letter at her any time things didn't go his way.

"What on earth would you do instead?" she asked. "If you quit?"

His eyebrows rose. "I do have a few talents."

"Of course," she said hastily. "But—"

"And surely, after your dramatic exit, you're in no position to tell me that it's necessary to have a second job lined up before quitting the first one."

Amy bit her lip. “No, but—”

“Especially when the boss has provoked the resignation.”

“I’m trying not to provoke you!”

“Really? I’m afraid I missed that part. And though it’s kind of you to worry about how I’ll make a living, Amy, it isn’t necessary. You just gave me three good leads. The college, the museum... Now what was the third one? Oh, yes, the magazine about antiques. Roving expert, hmm? That would look nice on my business card.”

“If you think six months in this business makes you an expert—” She saw his eyes turn to ice once more and stopped in midsentence. True as the comment had been, why take the chance of aggravating him even more? “You can’t just walk out of here, you know.”

“If your next move is to tell me that I have to give you a month’s notice, you can hardly hold me to a higher standard than you used for yourself.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “What’s it going to be, Amy?”

“What’s your hurry?” she asked irritably. “What difference does it make to you if I take a while to think about it?” Even though there was really nothing to think about—and it was apparent that Dylan knew it, too.

“Because if I’m going to be free for lunch, I still have time to make a date. So stop dithering and decide.”

Amy sighed and slid off the desk. “Get out of my chair,” she said. “I’ve got work to do.”

Dylan noted with interest that she’d landed with her neat little Italian sandals placed squarely between his outstretched feet, so close that it would be nearly impossible for him to stand up without brushing against her. He considered for a moment whether she could actually have intended to issue an invitation, and concluded that she’d been too annoyed even to think about where she was standing.

Just as well, he thought. The last thing he needed was to get tangled up with his new boss, and he’d better remember it. She’d already made a few uncomfortably shrewd comments. Accidentally, he was sure, but if he’d had any idea just how astute Amy Sherwood could be without even trying, he wouldn’t have left the decision of whether he stayed or left in her hands.

But he had offered her the choice, and he couldn’t back out now without causing the very curiosity he was trying to avoid. So the key was to keep her too busy to think. Too busy to ask questions.

“What’s first?” he asked as he stood up.

Amy turned at the same moment, and his cheek brushed against the dark brown cloud of hair. Obviously, he thought with a flicker of regret, he’d read her correctly, for she leaped back, bumping into the corner of the desk and almost staggering.

He put a hand on her shoulder to keep her from losing her balance. Yes, her hair was as soft as that fleeting touch had suggested. It lay like silk over his fingers.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she snapped, shrugging his hand away.

“Following orders,” Dylan said innocently. “You told me to get out of your chair.”

“I didn’t tell you to hug me.” She sat down with a thump.

“If that’s what you call a hug, it’s no wonder you...” He saw the gold sparks of anger in her eyes and prudently moved around the desk to a safer distance. “Which stack of folders do you want first? Do you want to bring yourself up to date on the auctions that are coming up next, or start with the list of people Gavin was cultivating?”

She looked thoughtful. “You’ve talked to the people he’s been working with, haven’t you?”

“Most of them, I suppose.”

“Then you can tell me much more about them than a bunch of dry notes can.”

She looked very small and fragile, sitting in Gavin’s too-big chair. Dylan told himself this was no time to get a Galahad complex. In fact, his best move would be to keep all the distance possible between him and Amy Sherwood.

But the message didn't seem to get through from his brain to his tongue. "I'll get the folders," he heard himself say, "and we can go through them together."

The once-neat surface of Gavin Sherwood's desk looked like a filing cabinet had exploded on it. Untidy stacks of file folders nearly covered the polished teak. Those detailing Gavin's dealings with prospective clients were piled on the southeast corner, while upcoming auctions occupied the southwest corner. Amy's head was bent over her father's desk calendar when Dylan pushed the door open and came in, carrying a large white paper bag.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" she asked absent-mindedly. "I hope you can read the cryptic codes Gavin uses to keep his schedule straight, because I certainly can't. He's got something written on the page for today, but it could be either 'confer with Rex' or 'confirm tickets.' Or maybe it's 'conifer forest.'"

Dylan grinned. "As far as I know, he hasn't taken up tree-hugging. If it's for this evening, I expect he meant Rex Maxwell."

Amy reached for a folder in the pile of prospective clients. "The one who's thinking of selling his Picasso?"

"That's the one." He started to unload small waxed paper boxes from the bag.

Amy pushed the folder aside to make room. "How much do I owe you for lunch?"

"Nothing, but next time it's your turn to buy."

Amy glanced at the files stacked on the desk. At this rate, there were going to be plenty of "next times." She hadn't even made a dent in the piles.

"The Maxwells are having a cocktail party tonight," Dylan went on. "The invitation is on my desk because I was just about to phone them with Gavin's regrets when you came in."

"You might let them know I'll be coming instead."

"I might let them know?" Dylan tipped his head to one side. "This," he said, pointing to the telephone on her desk, "is an instrument of communication. Do you know why it's here? Because you pick it up and press the buttons and talk to the person who answers."

Amy stared at him in disbelief. "What difference does it make if you call the Maxwells about Gavin or about me?"

"You're not confined to a hospital bed."

"You mean you don't make calls for Gavin when he's here? What kind of personal assistant refuses to use the telephone?"

"One who is not a secretary." He handed her a pair of chopsticks.

How ridiculous could he be? "You didn't object to going downstairs to wait for the deliveryman. That's pretty secretarial."

"Oh, but that's different."

"Why? Because you were hungry?"

"You got it in one try. Congratulations. Anyway, it'll be your turn tomorrow."

Amy dipped her chopsticks into a container of sweet and sour chicken. "Take a letter, Mr. Copeland. To whom it may concern—that's you, of course. This is to inform you that there has been a change in policy concerning the duties of personal assistant—that's also you—to the acting CEO—that's me—"

Dylan was still wielding his chopsticks. "Sorry, boss. I don't do dictation, either. If you'd like to get someone up here from the secretarial pool, call extension seventy-two."

Amy fixed him with a look. "And how would you know that, if Gavin does all his own telephoning?"

"Because whenever I need typing or photocopies, I call them."

Of course. "It's a shame you don't do shorthand. It wouldn't be nearly as fun dictating a character reference for you if you're not enjoying every word along with me." She set the chicken aside and

investigated a container that seemed to hold mostly broccoli. “Gavin made a note on tomorrow’s schedule, too. It’s something about running an errand, I think, but I don’t have any idea what.”

Dylan glanced at the calendar. “Not running an errand. Just running.”

“You mean like jogging? My father doesn’t jog.”

“Maybe he didn’t in his previous life.”

Another thing we have to thank Honey for, Amy thought. I wonder if that’s why he had the heart attack. She kept her voice level. “How often does he do this?”

“Whenever he thinks it’s time to once again nudge Mitchell Harlow into thinking about getting rid of his family’s autograph collection.”

“I should have known it wasn’t for the exercise,” Amy said glumly.

“Mitchell runs through Country Club Plaza every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning starting at 6:00 a.m. sharp. Rain or shine, he’s religious about it—and it’s the only time you can rely on catching him. So about once a week Gavin’s been going, too.”

“And this collection of autographs is worth it?”

“Gavin hasn’t actually seen it, but someone who has told him it includes Martin Luther and Catherine the Great.”

Amy sighed. “Then I guess I’m going jogging in the morning.”

“Your father would be proud of you.”

His face was perfectly straight, but Amy was certain she detected a note of suppressed laughter in Dylan’s voice. What she wouldn’t give to make him swallow his amusement...but once she started to think about ways to get even, the answer was obvious. “Of course, I wouldn’t know Mitchell Harlow if I tripped over him, so I’ll need you to come along and introduce me. Six in the morning, you said? Shall I pick you up?” She was pleased to see that his face had tightened just a little.

Dylan began gathering up the debris of their lunch. “No, thanks. I’ll meet you at the fountain.”

“Wait a minute—the Plaza has at least a hundred fountains.”

“The big one. Neptune and the seahorses. I’ll get you the Maxwells’ invitation so you can let them know you’re coming.”

Amy bit her lip to keep from smiling at the resigned note in his voice. That evens things up a little, she thought. And about time, too.

It took Amy all afternoon to make a perceptible dent in the stacks of files Dylan had sorted out for her to look at, and the experience had left her with a new appreciation of the challenges of her father’s job. Then, just as she was congratulating herself for everything she’d accomplished, Dylan appeared with yet another stack.

Amy wanted to groan. “What are those?”

“More prospects that I found lurking on top of a filing cabinet. Gavin must have left them there instead of putting them back.”

“Let me guess. You don’t file, either.”

“Of course I file, but only the things I pull out myself.”

“Good. You’ll know right where to put all these back when I’m finished with them.”

He didn’t comment, but Amy had the feeling he’d like to. Instead, he said, “Perhaps I should warn you that the Maxwells are sticklers for punctuality.”

“I’m on my way right now.” She dug her handbag from the bottom drawer.

“I’ll leave these here on the desk so they’ll be ready when you come in tomorrow.”

“Don’t turn the lights out when you leave,” Amy ordered, “just in case those folders act like coat hangers and multiply in the dark.”

Downstairs, the sales room was still quiet, with no auction scheduled until the weekend. But under the watchful eye of the sales staff, a half-dozen people were studying the furniture displayed in the showrooms, browsing through the catalog and even measuring the pieces.

The waiting room was half-full of people waiting their turn to inspect the merchandise, and at the desk Robert was looking harried. He paused as Amy passed the desk, however, and called her name. When she turned, he stretched out a hand to her.

“I didn’t know when you came in this morning that you were staying, Ms. Sherwood,” he said. “Things have been a little uncertain around here for the past few days, with your father so sick. But now—well, the whole staff is thanking heaven that you’re back where you belong.”

Amy could have sworn his eyes were misty. “I’ll try not to destroy your faith in me,” she said, keeping her voice as light as she could.

She rushed home to change her clothes and found the red light blinking madly on her answering machine. Remembering how the simple act of picking up her messages that morning had fractured her life, she almost ignored this batch. But habit made her push the button anyway, turning the volume up so she could listen from her bedroom while she changed.

Her mother had called. Just to chat, she’d said, and to invite Amy to stop in over the weekend and see her new furniture. She sounded almost normal, Amy thought. Only someone who knew her very well would have detected strain in Carol’s voice.

The second call was from the head curator of the museum. She swore under her breath. Dylan had kept her so buried in files that she’d completely forgotten to make the necessary calls to warn her prospective employers of the sudden hitch in her plans.

Funny, she thought, how it had taken that speed bump to help her see what it was she really wanted to do. She didn’t mind calling the museum and the college to let them know that she wouldn’t be available after all. But the magazine...the magazine was a little different.

Connoisseur’s Choice was far from being the stuffy old publication that Dylan had suggested it was. It was a glossy, sophisticated monthly magazine which covered an enormous range of both genuine antiques and interesting collectibles. A sort of reference book which happened to be published in segments, the magazine had actually become a collectible itself, for there was a brisk demand for secondhand issues—even ten-year-old ones. If in doubt, buyers and collectors consulted Connoisseur’s Choice, and they ignored its suggestions at their peril. Just to be associated with the magazine was to become an instant authority.

As for the position of roving expert, it might have been fashioned especially for Amy. “We’re looking for someone who has experience with everything,” the editor had told her. “Not just priceless paintings or hand-hammered silver or Tang horses. Our readers are interested in those things, certainly, but not many of them will ever own one. We need someone who’s interested in, and knowledgeable about, things like political buttons and movie posters and patent medicine bottles.”

“Someone exactly like me, Brad,” Amy had said. And though Brad Parker hadn’t committed himself at the time, he had seemed to agree.

Earlier in the week, he had called to tell her that the publisher liked her credentials and he expected to be able to make her an offer within a few days. And now she was going to have to tell him that she wouldn’t be able to take the job for a month at least—and hope that he wanted her badly enough to wait.

It was a rotten shame, she thought, that Dylan Copeland hadn’t jumped at the chance to prove himself by taking over the helm at Sherwood Auctions. Odd, too. The one thing she would never have suspected of him was a shortage of initiative.

She hailed a cab to take her to the Maxwells’ apartment tower rather than risk finding a place to park, because she’d cut things a little finer than she’d planned. She was still trying to catch her breath as she rang the Maxwells’ doorbell on the top floor just a couple of minutes after the hour specified on the invitation.

A bluff, hearty man greeted her, and Amy apologized for being late. “I’m afraid I didn’t allow time for a security check, but the guard downstairs was quite troubled over the fact that I don’t look like a Mr. Sherwood.”

Rex Maxwell laughed heartily. “I’m glad to know Pete doesn’t need his eyes examined,” he said and guided her over to the bar. Immediately the doorbell chimed again and he moved off to answer it.

Just as well, Amy thought. She could hardly ask him straight off whether he’d decided to auction the Picasso.

With a glass in her hand, she began to wander through the apartment. The rooms were huge and bare-looking, with blocky steel furniture and the occasional modern painting on the walls. She saw nothing of the caliber of a Picasso, though. Did they keep it in a vault somewhere? If so, she understood why they were thinking of selling it, because there was little point in owning a painting like that if you couldn’t see and enjoy it.

Or had the painting already gone to some other auction house?

Until now, her feelings about Gavin’s fears of losing his clients had been almost academic, but suddenly the threat had become much more personal. She felt her chest tightening.

Remember the size of that stack of files, she reminded herself. Her father must have been working on a hundred prospective clients. Some of them simply had to come through; the percentages were in her favor.

Still, the sheer size of the number was not as reassuring as Amy would have liked it to be. If—despite all his experience and contacts—Gavin needed to work on a hundred prospects in order to end up with just a few auctions, then how could she hope to snare enough business to satisfy his needs?

She saw a familiar face here and there in the crowd, mostly people that she’d happened to notice when they had attended auctions but a few that she’d worked with directly in the last couple of years.

One of them, a blue-haired matron, came up to her. “How’s your mother doing these days, Amy?”

Amy flinched. Why, she wondered, did people insist on asking her about Carol’s health and Gavin’s marital plans? Because they felt uncomfortable calling up Carol or Gavin, she supposed. But did they honestly expect Amy to spill the gory details?

“I haven’t talked to her for a few days,” she said honestly.

The woman sniffed. “I suppose that shouldn’t be a surprise, now that you’ve taken sides with your father.”

Unbelieving, Amy stared at her. “What on earth makes you think that?”

“My friend called me a few minutes ago. Cell phones are wonderful things, aren’t they?” She patted her handbag. “Our whole bridge club has them now. She was in the waiting room at Sherwood Auctions a few minutes ago and heard that you’ve started working there again.”

“News certainly travels quickly,” Amy said.

“And what does Carol think of you making up with your father?”

If she knew the whole story she’d probably be thrilled.

“Why don’t you ask her?” Amy said coolly. “I’m sure she’d love to hear from her friends.”

The matron fixed her with a stare. “I don’t know what your father is thinking of, the old goat,” she said. “Taking up with a bimbo, at his age. No wonder his heart attacked him.”

She’s just fishing, Amy told herself. Trying to get a reaction. “Shall I tell him you’re devastated that another obligation will prevent you from attending his wedding?” she asked gently. “Excuse me, I see someone I must speak with.”

She moved through the crowd, nodding and smiling at people she didn’t even see, still shaken by the encounter.

She’d known, of course, that the Sherwoods’ friends would be startled by the divorce and stunned by Gavin’s choice of a new wife. And not only their friends objected, either—on the night of his heart attack, Amy had heard one of Gavin’s nurses mutter something about Honey being so dim she couldn’t spell CPR. But it hadn’t occurred to Amy that so many people would take the matter personally, much less feel they had a right to comment.

That very direct animosity wasn't going to make her job any easier, Amy reflected. It wasn't only Gavin's heart attack that had threatened his business.

She reached the far end of the room and turned back, and her gaze snagged on the Picasso. It was hanging alone on a stark white wall, and nearby stood a woman who looked as much like the figure in the painting as it was possible for a living human to resemble the modernistic form. Her face was all sharp angles and shadows, and the individual features—though not unpleasing—didn't seem to belong together. As Amy watched, the woman waved a hand casually toward the painting and spoke animatedly to the man standing next to her.

Amy studied the man and, recognizing him, allowed herself to breathe again. He was a bright light of local industry, not an appraiser or art expert or auctioneer, as she'd feared. For the moment at least, the Picasso was still within her reach.

"It's a very nice painting," said a man standing next to her. "But you shouldn't look at it with that covetous expression, Amy. Mrs. Maxwell might object."

Amy looked up at the editor of *Connoisseur's Choice*. "Hi, Brad," she said, trying not to sound breathless. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Oh, we get invited to all the best parties. It's one of the perks of working for the magazine."

"Speaking of the magazine," Amy began, "I was going to call you tomorrow."

"Getting anxious? It does seem to have taken the publisher forever to make up his mind. But he finally gave me the go-ahead this afternoon to offer you the job at the salary we discussed. When can you start?"

"That's the problem, I'm afraid. Until my father's back on his feet..."

She tried to explain why she was needed so badly at Sherwood Auctions for a while, but the hollow feeling inside her expanded as she watched Brad's face darken.

"I was hoping to have a new roving expert on board next week," he said. "Waiting a month or more... I don't know what the publisher's going to say, Amy."

"He's the one who's taken three weeks to make up his mind that he wanted me at all," she argued.

"As far as that goes, Mr. Dougal's getting old and a bit unpredictable these days. We've learned not to expect him to make snap decisions. But when he does make up his mind—"

"But what's the difference if it's a little longer before I can start? Almost everyone you hire must have some loose ends to tie up before they can start work."

Brad swirled the ice cubes which were all that remained of his drink. "I'll have to run it past him again and let you know." He turned toward the bar.

"Good," Amy called after him. "By the time he gets back to you, I'll be free. In the meantime, you can find me at Sherwood Auctions—working hard so I can get out of there in a hurry."

With a sigh, she set her own glass on the tray of a passing waiter. The party was already starting to break up, she realized. The Maxwells, it seemed, not only expected their guests to arrive punctually but to depart the same way.

Amy hung back till the crowd thinned, hoping for a chance to have a private word with her hosts. If they were thinking of selling the Picasso...

Now that she'd seen it, she had no doubt of the painting's value. It was a major work which would bring millions at auction, and the commission for Sherwood Auctions would be a significant chunk of cash.

She multiplied the figures in her head and concluded that this one deal could produce enough money to solve Gavin's financial crunch in one blow. She wouldn't even have to wait for the auction to actually be held. As soon as the Maxwells had signed an agreement, Amy could turn all the arrangements over to Dylan and go off to *Connoisseur's Choice* with a clear conscience. She'd be happy and Gavin would be ecstatic. Dylan might not be thrilled, but he was certainly capable of carrying out the details.

If only she could pull it off.

Eventually there was a moment when the Maxwells were standing alone by the front door, and Amy seized her chance. “Thank you for letting me come in my father’s place tonight.” She held out her business card. It was part of the outdated supply that she should have thrown away after she resigned from the auction house. It still listed her as an appraiser—but at least the Maxwells would have her name right. “Gavin will be back to work in a few weeks, but he’s asked me to tell you that if you make a decision about the Picasso in the meantime he’s authorized me to act for him in arranging the sale.”

Mrs. Maxwell stared at the business card she was holding as if it had abruptly turned into a cockroach. She suddenly looked even more like the impossible woman of the painting, and her voice had turned to ice. “What are you talking about?”

Rex Maxwell shifted from one foot to the other. “Now, my dear...a mistake...anyone could misunderstand...Gavin must have thought...”

His wife turned on him. “You talked to Gavin Sherwood about selling my Picasso?” The accusation cut sharply across the remaining party conversation.

Rex Maxwell glared at Amy, but his voice was mild, almost pacifying. “The possibility came up,” he admitted. “I didn’t say yes or no.”

He was lying, and Amy knew it. The glare he’d sent her way told her that he and Gavin had seriously discussed the sale—but Rex Maxwell had never consulted his wife about it.

She felt unsteady on her feet, as if the apartment tower had suddenly begun swaying in a high wind.

Now it made sense that Gavin’s note had mentioned only the husband. The only remaining question was whether he had known his friend was working behind his wife’s back. Had he even suspected it, or had he been as innocent as Amy herself?

Not that it mattered now what Gavin might have known, because the cat was most definitely out of the bag.

It was too bad the apartment tower was entirely air-conditioned and the windows were all the tightly sealed sort, Amy thought. Because right now would be a perfect time to throw herself out of one.

CHAPTER THREE

MUCH to Dylan's surprise, Amy was already waiting for him when he walked up to the Neptune fountain, at the corner of the Plaza shopping district, at precisely six o'clock the next morning. She was sitting on a bench with her head in her hands, and she didn't look up as he approached. In fact, she didn't even flinch when his Irish setter plopped at her feet, panting from the run they'd already had, with her tail slapping against Amy's ankles.

"You'd better stay a little more alert to your surroundings," he suggested. "A mugger who saw you sitting there that way would think you're a pretty tasty morsel."

"Who cares?" Her voice was muffled by her palms. "Bring on the muggers."

Dylan wrapped the dog's leash around his wrist and put one foot up on the bench, stretching his muscles to keep them limber in the still-cool air of a mid-May morning. He didn't look at her, and he kept his voice carefully neutral. "It must have been quite a cocktail party last night if it left you with a hangover of those proportions."

She looked up at him with her small, pointed chin aggressively thrust out. "It wasn't how much I drank that was the problem."

"I suppose you're claiming it was food poisoning instead," he scoffed. "They all say that."

"No, I didn't get a funny-tasting sausage." She sighed. "The problem is...well, I didn't just put my foot in my mouth. I shoved it so far down my throat that a surgeon could remove my appendix and trim my toenails all in the same operation."

Dylan stopped stretching and looked at her more closely. "That bad, huh? Who'd you insult?"

"The Maxwells, of course. I committed a major faux pax, and even though I apologized all over myself, I barely made it out alive." She fixed her gaze on him. "If I thought for an instant that you knew Rex Maxwell was trying to sell that Picasso behind his wife's back, and you didn't warn me, I'd...I'd..."

She apparently couldn't conjure up a punishment that was bad enough. Dylan decided not to give her a chance to think about it. "No, I didn't set you up," he said. "But now you see why I didn't want to be the one in charge."

"Thank you very much for the sympathy."

"At least you're efficient. Your methods leave no question that any more time spent on the Picasso would be wasted."

She gave a little moan.

"I wonder why he wanted to put it up for auction in the first place," Dylan mused, "if he knew his wife was likely to object."

"He said Gavin misunderstood him and he never had any intention of selling."

Dylan considered and shook his head. "You know better than to think Gavin makes that sort of mistake. More likely Rex Maxwell is in financial difficulties and doesn't want to confess to the wife. Not that it matters to us. Scratch the Picasso and move on to the next possibility." He felt a shudder run through her. "What's the matter? From the sound of things, it can't get worse than that experience."

"I certainly hope not," she said drearily. "Where's a good, efficient mugger when you need one? If somebody hit me over the head, maybe I'd lose my memory along with my wallet."

"Put the whole thing behind you." He held out a hand to pull her up. "Come on. A couple of miles through the Plaza and you'll be a new woman." He stepped back to look at her appraisingly. "Nice shorts. Not only are they attention-seeking pink, but they fit just right."

"Don't flatter yourself that I'm out to impress you. This was the only pair I could lay hands on this morning in the dark."

“I know perfectly well you’re not trying to impress me,” he said gently. “You were just trying to attract muggers.”

She began to stretch. The dog, who knew the routine, stood up and whined, eager to be off again, and for the first time Amy seemed to notice her. “Aren’t you a beauty?”

The setter tossed her head bashfully and sneezed.

“And she’s modest, too,” Dylan said. “Give her a compliment and she promptly proves that she’s only human. Or something like that.”

“How far have you run already?”

“A mile or so. Reggie would rather run in Loose Park, but she’ll make do with the Plaza if she has to.”

“Well, I don’t imagine she gets the same excitement from window-shopping that people do.” Amy dropped into step beside him, and Reggie loped easily ahead. “Do you live somewhere around here? If you usually run in Loose Park—that’s the one just south of the Plaza, isn’t it?”

Around the corner ahead of them, Dylan spotted a jogger turning into their path and interrupted her. “There’s Mitchell Harlow, right on time.” He lengthened his stride in order to catch up, and glanced over his shoulder to see if Amy was having trouble keeping the pace.

Her gaze was fixed on their quarry, and she looked startled. Dylan realized that from his description of Mitchell Harlow’s jogging routine, she’d probably expected an athlete instead of a short, prematurely balding, not-quite-rotund man in a purple running suit.

Amy speeded up till she was beside him again. “He doesn’t have a wife who’ll have a fit about selling his autograph collection, does he?”

“The last I heard, he wasn’t married.”

“And exactly how long has that been? Last week? A year?”

Dylan grinned at her and raised his voice. “Good morning, Mitchell.”

Mitchell Harlow turned his head to return the greeting, but he saw Amy first and the words seemed to stick in his throat.

It was the sort of reaction Dylan had expected—especially after he’d noticed the pink shorts himself. So he certainly had no reason to feel irritated by the bug-eyed way Mitchell Harlow was goggling at Amy.

It was obvious that Amy had also noted the interest in Mitchell Harlow’s eyes, for there was a gleam in her own. Dylan wondered if she was speculating whether in this case, unlike with the Maxwells, she had an advantage that her father didn’t.

Though Mitchell had been awestruck by Amy’s appearance, he found his voice quickly enough when Dylan introduced her. “Sherwood?” he said. “Are you related to the guy who’s always nagging me to sell my autograph collection?”

She shot a look at Dylan, who shrugged. He’d done his best; now it was up to her.

“I heard somewhere he’d taken up with quite a dish,” Mitchell went on. “But I had no idea what kind of dish we were talking about.”

Dylan glanced sideways at Amy, curious to see how she would react to being confused with Honey. She looked a little like a firecracker just before the explosion—sparks and all. He stepped nimbly into the breach. “That’s a different dish, Mitchell. This one’s his daughter.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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