

SHELLEY
COOPER

LAURA AND
THE LAWMAN



INTRIGUE ...

Shelley Cooper

Laura And The Lawman

«HarperCollins»

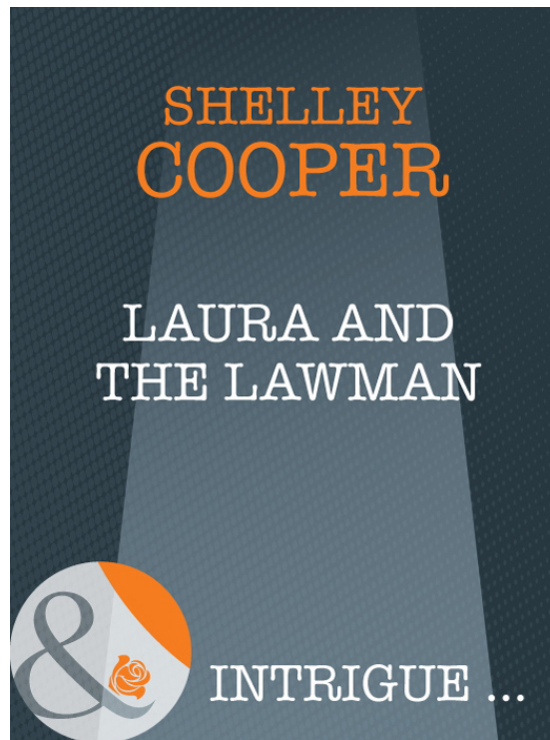
Cooper S.

Laura And The Lawman / S. Cooper — «HarperCollins»,

Police officer Laura Langley's objective was clear: pose as art appraiser Ruby O'Toole and infiltrate suspected drug kingpin Joseph Merrill's organization. Yet thoughts of another man consumed her day and night. Joseph's mysterious employee Michael Corsi had a sensual stare that made Laura forget her purpose, his magnetism threatening her guarded heart. With the undercover investigation at stake, Laura had to resist the desire Michael awakened in her. Because she knew how deadly falling for a man who might be on the wrong side of the law could be. Then she discovered that she wasn't the only one masquerading. But with their covers nearly blown, would their passion survive another night?

Содержание

“You’re so beautiful.” Michael spoke as if he were in the midst of a revelation.	6
Laura and the Lawman	7
SHELLEY COOPER	8
Contents	9
Prologue	10
Chapter 1	12
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	29
Chapter 4	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	40



**“You’re so beautiful.” Michael spoke as
if he were in the midst of a revelation.**

Laura’s breath caught, and something deep inside her unfurled and went all soft and malleable. A pulse of pleasure, pure and unadulterated, the strength of which she hadn’t experienced in years, radiated slowly outward from her center. It left her feeling hot and definitely bothered as they both continued to stand there awkwardly, neither seeming to know what to do or say.

Don’t, Laura wanted to cry. Don’t look at me that way. Because if you do, I won’t be able to...
To what? Do her job? Handle it? Resist him? Walk away?

Laura and the Lawman

Shelley Cooper



SHELLEY COOPER

first experienced the power of words when she was in the eighth grade and wrote a paragraph about the circus for a class assignment. Her teacher returned it with an A and seven pluses scrawled across the top of the paper, along with a note thanking her for rekindling so vividly some cherished childhood memories. Since Shelley had never been to the circus and had relied solely on her imagination to compose the paragraph, the teacher's remarks were a revelation. Since then, Shelley has relied on her imagination to help her sell dozens of short stories and to write her first novel, *Major Dad*, a 1997 Romance Writers of America Golden Heart finalist in Best Long Contemporary, as well as many more. She hopes her books will be as moving to her readers as her circus paragraph was to that long-ago English teacher.

To my grandmother, Martha Belle Varner, for the Easter egg hunts, sleepovers, countless games of canasta and, most important, the laughter.

And in loving memory of Leonard Varner, who had muscles to rival Popeye's, could ride a bike backward and always praised me by saying, "You done good, kid."

Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15

Prologue

The two men met in the parking lot of a busy truck stop located off of Interstate 80 in western Pennsylvania. It was nearing midnight, and they had each traveled in excess of sixty miles to make the assignation.

Together they entered a brightly lit diner and sat down in a small booth in the rear. From that vantage point they could keep an eye on all comings and goings.

As the sole liaison between undercover cops and the department they all served, the men were used to meeting in out-of-the-way places. Places where they were unlikely to be seen by those they didn't want to see them, and even less likely to be overheard.

Neither spoke until two frosty mugs of root beer, along with two huge plates of food, each loaded with enough fat and cholesterol to guarantee a heart attack, had been placed on the table.

"When's he going in?" Erik Hitchcock asked after taking a hearty swallow of his drink.

"Two weeks," Gregory Phelps replied, spearing his sixteen-ounce Delmonico steak with a knife and fork. "Have you told her yet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Word came down they don't want her to know. They think it'll be safer for them both. If she doesn't know, she won't make a mistake."

Erik paused to take another sip of root beer, then gave a loud belch for which he didn't apologize. "What about your guy?" he asked, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth before slathering butter and sour cream on a baked potato. "Have you told him we already have someone inside?"

"No. I got the same word you did."

Both men ate in silence.

"Know what I think?" Erik finally asked.

"What?"

"My girl's from New York, right? And your guy is from Pittsburgh. He's a hometown boy. I think the chief wants Pittsburgh to get the credit for this, not New York. That's why he's sending your guy in."

"Even though NYPD's commissioner is his brother-in-law?"

"Because NYPD's commissioner is his brother-in-law."

"Why didn't we send my guy in first, then?" Gregory asked.

Erik grabbed the dessert menu and studied it for a minute. "He didn't fit the bill for the job opening. No one in Pittsburgh did."

"So they had to bring someone in from the outside."

"Exactly. This case is extremely delicate. We send someone in, she has to be an expert."

"Or he," Gregory interjected.

"Or he," Erik acknowledged with a nod. "Anyway, when we knew we didn't have anyone for the job, that's when the chief went begging to his brother-in-law."

"And it's been sticking in his craw ever since?"

"Like the ham sandwich Vinnie Turco choked to death on. That's why, when this opening unexpectedly arose, and we had someone who did fit the bill, the chief decided to send your guy in."

"Two pairs of eyes and ears are better than one, eh?"

"Especially if our pair of eyes and ears pulls off the job." Erik looked rueful. "I have to be honest with you. I'm pulling for my girl. She's smart, she's good, and she's got a great pair of legs."

"She's also going back to New York when this is over," Gregory said, "and we have to stay here with the chief."

“Good point. She’s making progress, though. She’s been inside a month now. It’ll be six weeks by the time your guy goes in. It might be too late for him. Hell, it might even be all over. Rumor has it a big shipment will be arriving shortly.”

“Has she found out how it will be coming in, and how it will go out?”

“Not yet.”

“Then my guy still has a chance. Who knows? If things go well, when this job is done maybe the chief’ll be in such a good mood we’ll all get promotions.”

Erik emptied his mug and replaced it on the table with a thump. “For that to happen, your guy would have to be something else.”

“He is.”

“Maybe,” Erik allowed. “But can he work miracles? And can he work them before my girl does?”

Gregory shrugged. “Only time will tell.”

Chapter 1

Antonio Garibaldi scanned the 4,000-square-foot auction floor and felt his stomach plunge like an elevator whose cable had snapped. He had never been so nervous in his life.

It was only to be expected, he told himself. After all, he lived and worked in a world where murder, violence and treachery were commonplace. A cop couldn't work undercover for any length of time and not carry on an intimate relationship with fear.

In general, fear was a good thing. It kept a man alert. Without it, he'd lose his edge, and probably his life. Truth was, though Antonio had a reputation for being a daredevil—some even said he took unnecessary risks—he was always nervous before starting a new job.

But the way he felt this morning was different. He'd never been this shaky before, and that threw him.

Maybe it was because the man he was replacing, a man who had presumably stumbled by accident across what Antonio was deliberately trying to discover, had disappeared without a trace.

Maybe it was because the recommendation that had allowed him to secure the position of head auctioneer for the Merrill Auction Gallery had claimed an expertise Antonio didn't possess. Though he'd regularly attended auctions since he was a child, and though he knew more about antique furniture than most dealers, the only auction he'd ever conducted had been during his recent, intensive two-week training session with one of the country's foremost auctioneers. Though he'd received high marks, that auction had been roughly a quarter the size of the one he'd be in charge of today.

Maybe it was because it had been months since he'd been with a woman, and his hormones were in overdrive.

Or maybe—and this seemed most logical to him—it was because he'd been looking forward to this job too much. A lot was riding on its outcome. Joseph Merrill was a suspected drug kingpin who controlled a large portion of the drug traffic in the tristate area encompassing western Pennsylvania. Many lives would be lost if he wasn't stopped. Working as an auctioneer for the man would be one of the most dangerous and demanding jobs Antonio had ever undertaken.

But it was more than that. He had a personal stake in the outcome of this case. He was counting on it to revitalize his interest in police work.

Family duty and a sense of adventure were the driving forces that had led Antonio to become a cop. Three generations of his family had proudly worn a uniform and badge. His father was a highly decorated officer. Two of his brothers were also cops. Police work was in his blood.

Given his propensity for danger and excitement, it was only natural that he'd gravitated into undercover work. Antonio was a good undercover cop. He did his job well and always got his man. He'd lived on the edge for years now, receiving commendations and advancing in rank. Until recently he'd loved every minute of it.

A few months ago shortly after his thirty-first birthday, a vague, indecipherable restlessness had filled him, and he began feeling less satisfaction in his work. He found himself consumed by a yearning for something more, although what that something more could be remained tantalizingly out of reach.

It was the repetition, he had decided one sleepless night, while he'd tossed and turned in his bed. For two years he'd been doing the same kind of undercover work. He needed something new. Something daring. Something exciting to spice things up.

When the opportunity to pose as head auctioneer for Joseph Merrill's auction gallery arose, Antonio had felt a wave of excitement wash over him. This was the change he'd been waiting for. The bonus was, he would be working full-time in a world he loved, a world he had—for too short a time as a youngster—shared with his mother, who had died of cancer when he was eleven.

The sound of the crowd penetrated his thoughts, and Antonio drew a quick, impatient breath. Now was not the time for a trip down memory lane. If he didn't stay focused on the job at hand, he wouldn't live long enough to bang the opening gavel, let alone nab Joseph Merrill and his cohorts. He might crave danger, but long ago he had decided there was no job worth getting killed over, and no suspect worth dying for.

His name was Michael Corsi, he reminded himself. He had a brand-new social security card, a driver's license and several credit cards in his wallet to attest to that fact. For the next several weeks, a month or two at most, Antonio Garibaldi would cease to exist. For his safety, and for the good of the job, he had to submerge himself in the role he was playing and forget about anything else.

A last glance at the crowd had his stomach fluttering once more. Then he saw her, and the butterflies in his middle stilled.

She was beautiful. There was no other way to describe her. The pink silk suit she wore flattered her trim figure without being overly revealing. It also exposed a generous length of long, slender leg to his appreciative gaze. Her shoulder-length brown hair gleamed in the artificial lighting, framing a face that, in repose, looked like a Madonna: small, heart-shaped, ivory-complected and utterly feminine.

He felt a stab of regret that he couldn't see her eyes because she was half-bent over one of the seated patrons. Then, as if drawn by his regard, she slowly straightened and looked directly at him.

For one endless, unguarded moment, they simply stared at each other. Her eyes were a brilliant emerald green. In their depths, Antonio saw intelligence, vulnerability and a loneliness that pierced his heart. That muscle began thudding unevenly when a new emotion was added. Awareness. Awareness of him as a man. He saw her throat work.

A second later it was as if someone had thrown a switch. Her eyes went blank, and she looked away. Reaching into a jacket pocket, she pulled out a compact and checked her hair and makeup. Snapping the compact shut, she sent him a dazzling smile that held none of the honesty he'd glimpsed a minute earlier. Antonio blinked. What had just happened?

He didn't care, he told himself, returning her smile with one of his own. For the first time that morning, he relaxed fully. Here, at least, might be the answer to his sexual frustration. If she was agreeable, that was, which he fervently hoped was the case. She was precisely the kind of distraction he needed to help him loosen up, and he made a mental note to meet up with her on his first break.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Joseph Merrill asked softly from behind him.

Antonio nearly jumped out of his skin at the unexpected arrival of his new boss. He didn't question how the older man knew exactly who had captured his attention. Joseph Merrill ran a tight ship. He made it a point to keep his eyes and ears open, and to know what his crew was doing at all times. He would have had to be half-blind to have missed how fixedly Antonio had been staring at the woman.

"Exquisite," he replied, turning his attention to the man at his side. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Ruby O'Toole." Joseph paused briefly before adding, "She's my woman."

The possessive note in Joseph's voice was unmistakable, as was the warning glance he shot Antonio.

"Ruby is a gifted appraiser of artwork. Part of her job involves helping out on auction day. Today she'll be one of your bid spotters."

Antonio had heard of Ruby O'Toole, and her beauty, from his fellow employees. He'd also read about her in the dossier on Joseph Merrill that he'd studied before going undercover. He felt a flicker of disappointment that his planned interlude with her would not come to pass. Getting involved with Joseph Merrill's lover on anything but a platonic basis would be most unwise. It could also prove fatal. Antonio hadn't stayed alive this long by being stupid. He wasn't about to start now.

Philosophically he shrugged his disappointment away. There would be someone else. There always was.

While an intimate relationship with Ruby O'Toole was definitely out, it didn't mean he couldn't befriend her, however. There was more than one way for Antonio to get the information he needed. He could get it from Joseph Merrill himself by earning the older man's trust. Or, if that didn't work, perhaps he could coax what he needed to learn from the woman with whom his boss shared nightly pillow talk. And if, at the end of the job, he found himself slapping handcuffs on her slender wrists, he would do so without a qualm.

"It's almost time to start," Joseph said, surveying the room with a proprietary air. "Nervous?"
Not for the reason you think. "A little."

"What's to worry about?" Joseph gave him a broad smile and clapped him on the back. "So it's your first day on the job. Big deal. It's not like you haven't done this a thousand times before. And it's not like this is the big time. I'm awfully proud of this place, and I do quite well financially. But face it. Sotheby's it ain't."

The rapidly filling room was a hive of activity. Folding chairs, arranged in neat rows, covered the center of the polished hardwood floor. About three-quarters of the chairs had already been claimed, the occupants chatting quietly to one another and fanning themselves with their assigned bid numbers.

No, it wasn't Sotheby's. But a good deal of money would exchange hands that day, and it was up to Antonio—correction, Michael—to see that it moved smoothly.

Antonio glanced at his watch. "Would you like me to start?"

"It's your ball game," Joseph said. "I have complete faith in you. Throw out the first pitch whenever you're ready."

Antonio made a rapid inventory of the items in front of him. Gavel? Check. Sale catalogue? Check. Glass of water? Check. He was prepared. He knew exactly what to do.

Filing away every thought, every impression, every sight and sound, to be carefully detailed in his notes later, he picked up the gavel and banged it solidly against the table. The time for worry, speculation and nervousness was over. It was show time.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he announced in a strong voice. "Welcome to the Merrill Auction Gallery. Today we have some very special items for your consideration. If everyone is ready, let us begin."

He turned to the large screen at his right, on which was projected a sterling silver tray. To his left, an assistant held up the actual item.

"Our first item up for bid is this beautiful tray. It was designed in the Chippendale style by Henry James Ashworth of Massachusetts. The U.S. Ambassador to Tunis received it as a gift from a visiting dignitary in 1957."

Antonio swept his gaze over the crowd. "Who will give me five hundred dollars for this coveted collectible?"

The hands started going up, and he was on his way.

"Laura! Laura, where are you?"

Laura Langley continued walking through the crowd, her gaze focusing on each bidder as a bid was offered. It took all of her self-control not to react to the woman who was calling her name. She was Ruby O'Toole, she reminded herself. The odds of anyone who knew Laura Langley being in this room were not high.

"There you are." The urgency in the woman's voice changed to fond exasperation. "I can't turn my back on you for a minute, you little minx."

Out of her peripheral vision, Laura saw a woman scoop up a toddler. The tension left her body, and she relaxed.

She was Ruby O'Toole, she reminded herself again. She couldn't afford to forget that.

The image brought to her mind by the name she had been saddled with was of a zaftig, peroxide blonde, something she most definitely was not. At five-six, with stubbornly straight brown hair, and

weighing at most 125 pounds soaking wet, not to mention almost as flat-chested and hipless as her brother, she could hardly be called zaftig.

Though the thought amused her, she didn't smile. In her role as Ruby O'Toole she did a lot of smiling. But, left to her own devices, Laura Langley rarely smiled.

There were other differences between Laura and Ruby. Considerable differences. Laura had an IQ of 145 and was a member of Mensa. Ruby had an IQ of 110, which was strictly average. The nickname braniac had haunted Laura throughout her school years. Ruby had never been accused of deep thought. Laura cared nothing about fashion. Ruby was obsessed with clothing and accessories. Laura hadn't looked at a man in a romantic way for four long years. Ruby lived and breathed for male attention. Laura was real. Ruby was purely make-believe.

They did have one thing in common: their knack for appraising art. That knack was the reason why Laura had spent the last part of April and all of May in Pittsburgh, instead of on the streets of New York City, which was her home. It was now the first weekend in June. The way things were going, it looked as if she'd be spending this month here, too.

She had never intended to be a cop. In fact, she'd been teaching art history in a Queens high school when, at the age of twenty-four, fate had stepped in and turned her life upside down.

Four years ago her husband pulled into a gas station with their infant son strapped snugly in his car seat. A drug deal gone sour on the opposite corner led to the exchange of gunfire. When the bullets stopped flying, Laura no longer had a husband or a child. They had become just another statistic, a line item on a police report indicating the NYPD was losing its war on drugs.

After she'd climbed out of her depression, which had taken the better part of a year, she had gotten mad. Raging mad. The way Laura saw it at the time, she had two choices. She could either go insane with anger and grief, or she could do something to make the loss of her husband and son mean more than a senseless waste. For a while it had been iffy which alternative she would select. In the end, though, she had chosen to act.

Thus, an unprepossessing art history teacher had been transformed into first a patrolwoman and later an undercover cop for the New York City Police Department. A highly decorated undercover cop who seemed fearless in the face of danger because she had nothing left to lose.

Unfortunately, the Laura who had arrived in Pittsburgh six weeks earlier was not the same woman who had excelled at the Police Academy. For one thing, she was no longer quite so fearless. The rage that had consumed her for so long now was abating, as was the single-mindedness with which she had allowed her job to swallow up every aspect of her life for three long years. While she still keenly mourned the loss of her husband and son, the memory of that loss no longer filled her every waking moment.

In its place Laura felt an unexpected restlessness. And a powerful yearning she couldn't define. Chalking the emotions up to too much work and too little rest, she had determined to take a much-postponed and much-needed vacation once the Merrill case was brought to a close.

If it was ever brought to a close.

As anxious as she was to take that vacation, now was not the time to think of all that. A glance at her watch told her it was time, however, for her break.

Signaling to her replacement, she grabbed a cup of coffee from the concession stand and propped her feet on an empty chair in a quiet corner of the room. Sighing, she took a sip of coffee and tried to ignore the way her breasts pinched in her push-up bra and her feet pinched in three-inch stiletto heels.

The coffee went a long way toward reestablishing her equilibrium. It was shattered a moment later when she saw Joseph headed purposely toward her. Her break was only ten minutes long, and she'd hoped to be able to use that time to rest her aching feet in peace. She should have known better. When they were out in public, Joseph rarely left her side.

Trailing behind him, predictably, was Matthew Rogers, his right-hand man and bodyguard. Matthew's massive shoulders strained against his suit jacket. His hands were as big as hams. He looked as if he could bench-press three hundred pounds easily, without breaking a sweat. He also looked like the thug that rumor whispered him to be.

"Well, what do you think?" Joseph asked.

He moved to stand directly behind her, while Matthew took up vigil a few feet away, his watchful gaze scouring the crowd. Leaning down, Joseph laced his arms loosely around her shoulders.

Trying not to flinch at the contact, Laura took another sip of coffee. "About what?"

He nodded toward the podium. "My newest employee."

She followed Joseph's gaze to the man who was currently in the middle of a bidding war, two women equally determined to be the proud possessor of a pair of diamond earrings. Already the bidding had surpassed the earrings' assessed value, and was climbing steadily higher, with no end reasonably in sight. Laura couldn't help wondering what the women wanted more: ownership of the earrings, or Michael Corsi's undivided attention.

He was worth vying for. It had been a long time since she'd seen any man with such striking good looks off the movie screen. But with his olive coloring, dark brown hair, roman nose, determined chin and chocolate-brown eyes that also held a good measure of intelligence, Michael Corsi could give any number of male heartthrobs a run for their money in the fluttering-of-the-female-heart department.

In addition to his good looks, he possessed a charisma that had the crowd eating out of his hand. He was the perfect auctioneer. What galled Laura was that, against her will, she found herself wanting to eat out of his hand, too.

Dismay filled her, and her heart thudded unevenly. Before her face could betray her thoughts, she returned her gaze to the cup in her hands.

It wasn't just that everyone in the room believed she belonged to Joseph, although that was a major consideration. What was even more important was that she knew who Michael Corsi was and who he wasn't. And who he wasn't was one of the good guys.

To be attracted to any man seemed a betrayal of both her husband and her son. To be attracted to Michael Corsi was ten times worse. He wasn't fit to shine the shoes Jacob had worn, which still lined the floor of her closet in her home back in Queens, let alone to try and take his place.

When she'd learned Michael Corsi would be working for Joseph, she'd had her contact officer investigate him. The information he'd relayed back to her had been extremely interesting. Michael Corsi had done time for dealing drugs. Was his acting as an auctioneer just a front for his real job, which was helping Joseph in his drug operations?

She didn't know. Not yet, anyway. But she intended to find out.

This time, when her gaze traveled to him, she felt nothing but disdain. The past six weeks spent trying to win Joseph Merrill's confidence had been more stressful than she'd expected. She was exhausted. As a result she'd misread simple appreciation for a handsome, albeit amoral, man as attraction. It was nothing, she told herself. Just another lapse proving how badly she needed a vacation.

Yet no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't forget the moment she had first gazed into his eyes. For a slice out of time she'd forgotten where she was. She'd even forgotten who she was.

It wasn't Ruby who had returned his piercing regard, but Laura. Laura, who had let her guard down and allowed the emotions of the past four years to shine in her eyes plainly for him to see. For surely he would understand.

When she'd realized her folly, she'd done what she could to repair the damage. She'd banished Laura and had Ruby smile her empty, flirtatious smile at him. She hoped he didn't puzzle too long over the seeming contradiction.

"Ruby?" Joseph said, sounding far away. "Ruby, did you hear me? I asked you a question."

"What?" She blinked and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little preoccupied."

“I was wondering what you thought of my newest employee.” There was a trace of impatience in his voice, and Laura knew she’d made a mistake by letting Michael Corsi unnerve her to the point where she’d forgotten the role she was playing.

She pretended to assess Joseph’s new auctioneer the way she would a painting she was trying to value. “The crowd is involved, and he’s moving things along at a good pace,” she said carefully. “He’s also getting top dollar for almost every item. Overall, I’d say he’s doing an excellent job. I think he’ll be a good addition to the team.”

“He will, won’t he?” Joseph murmured.

“You seem surprised,” Laura said.

“Just intrigued.”

“About what?”

It was Joseph’s turn to seem distracted as he dropped his arms from around her shoulders and straightened to his full height.

“About whether Michael Corsi just might turn out to be far more valuable to me than he ever anticipated,” he murmured.

Laura wondered what he meant, but didn’t dare ask. Only six weeks had passed since she’d finagled their meeting and talked her way into the job as his art appraiser. She didn’t want to appear overly interested in his personal business, didn’t want to arouse his suspicions that she was anything more than a woman who did her job well. A woman who preened under male attention and who always kowtowed to a man’s acknowledged superiority. Joseph’s acknowledged superiority.

If the rumors were true, and she believed they were, Joseph was one of the biggest drug distributors in the eastern United States. He hadn’t acquired that status by trusting blindly. As Laura kept reminding her contact officer when she reported in to him, this was nothing like making a buy from a street dealer. If the department was serious about taking out the big guys, then they had to be willing to put in the necessary time.

She would have to earn Joseph’s trust. She’d made great strides in that arena, but he had yet to invite her into his inner circle. Laura had every expectation that the invitation was looming ever closer on the horizon. She just had to bide her time and play her part.

In the meantime every penny Joseph paid her, minus applicable expenses, was going straight into police coffers. They weren’t losing money on this deal. When it all ended, hopefully many lives would also be saved.

“When I asked what you thought of him,” Joseph said, “I wasn’t talking about his performance on the podium. I want to know what you think of Michael Corsi as a man. Do you find him attractive?”

Laura stilled. At the time she’d started the job, she’d been prepared to have Joseph direct his attentions her way. In fact, that had been essential if she was to earn his confidence. What she hadn’t been prepared for was the revelation that he was gay, that he wanted her to pose as his lover, and that he was willing to pay her a generous stipend, in addition to her regular salary, for her to do so.

His standing in the community was important to him, he’d told her. He didn’t want it jeopardized, and he was apprehensive about what might happen if the truth of his sexual orientation were to become common knowledge. If she took the job, he wouldn’t expect her to live a celibate lifestyle. She was free to take a lover, so long as she exercised extreme discretion.

Since his request had meant she would be working even more closely with him, and that he was growing to trust her, Laura had readily agreed. Was he toying with her now? she wondered. Testing her loyalty? At times Joseph Merrill was an extremely difficult man to read.

“Is he gay?” she asked.

Joseph leaned over her again. “Checking to see if I’m staking a claim?” he whispered into her ear.

“You are my boss,” she replied lightly. “I wouldn’t want to overstep my bounds. You pay me too well.”

Joseph chuckled his appreciation. "I do like a woman who knows on which side her bread is buttered. Alas, he's not gay, more's the pity. So, what do you think?"

Laura gazed at Michael Corsi and felt a flutter in her midsection. There it was again, that unwelcome awareness of him as a man. A starburst of anticipation radiated outward, leaving a tingling sensation in its wake. She fought it back, searching instead to retrieve her earlier feelings of disdain.

"He is a handsome devil, isn't he?" she said, knowing Joseph would expect Ruby to make such a remark.

"Adorable," Joseph replied. "Too bad they buried your heart with your fiancé."

Rule number one of undercover work was to come up with a good cover story. Before she had known he was gay, she'd wanted Joseph to be attracted to her. But she hadn't wanted their relationship to become intimate. To prevent that eventuality, while hopefully keeping his interest in her heightened, she had concocted the story that Ruby O'Toole's fiancé had been killed in a car accident on the eve of their wedding. The loss was still too fresh, too painful for her to enter into a new relationship.

"Yeah," she agreed, sighing theatrically. "Too bad."

"Yet you still dress and act provocatively around men. You still flirt outrageously with them." There was a speculative gleam in Joseph's eyes that she didn't like and needed to put to rest. Immediately.

"That's because all the men around here know I belong to you. Flirting with them is safe."

Reaching up a hand, she patted her hair. "Besides," she cooed, "a girl needs to know she hasn't lost her technique. I may not allow men to touch right now, but I definitely want them to look. I won't be in mourning forever, you know."

Joseph chuckled. "Spoken like a woman."

"I am a woman, Joseph. I've never made that a secret."

It was an unfortunate choice of words. She realized her mistake when Joseph said, "I wonder what secrets you are hiding from me."

Hours of practice in front of a mirror had perfected the guileless look she aimed his way.

"Secrets?" she asked, an air of honest bewilderment in her voice, although her heart was thudding heavily. "I have no secrets."

"Everyone has secrets, my dear. Everyone has something to hide. No one is exactly as he presents himself to others. I can't help wondering what it is you're keeping from me."

Her laughter was light and airy, and pure Ruby. "I'll never tell," she said, batting her eyelashes at him. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Oh, I will, my dear, I will," Joseph assured her, and she felt a chill.

His words reminded her of exactly how dangerous he was. The man Michael Corsi had replaced as head auctioneer had disappeared without a trace. He wasn't the first person to suddenly leave Joseph's employ, nor was he the first to drop out of sight, never to be seen again. Of course, without any bodies, and without any evidence whatsoever that Joseph had played a role in those disappearances, no charges could be brought.

The speculation in Joseph's eyes faded and he said, "Have I told you lately how glad I am that I hired you? If not for you, I would have auctioned an extremely valuable painting for what would have amounted to peanuts."

Laura had barely believed it herself when she'd discovered the old master mixed in with a pile of worthless canvases. It was a once-in-a-lifetime find. She'd gone immediately to Joseph with the news, hoping to raise her value in his eyes. She knew he would think that Ruby easily could have arranged for someone to buy it at a pittance, then turned around and sold it for its true value, pocketing the profit for herself. That she hadn't went a long way toward proving her loyalty to him. It was after that discovery that Joseph had asked her to pose as his love interest.

Over the past six weeks she had learned a lot about Joseph Merrill. One of the most important things she'd uncovered was that he wasn't exactly a wizard where the items he auctioned off were concerned. He could barely tell an oak chair from a pine one, let alone discern the difference between a valuable master and a starving-artist watercolor. His success as an auctioneer was due solely to the talents of the people he hired to work for him. Joseph hired only the best. Which indicated to Laura, at least, that his business was a front for something else.

"You may have expressed your gratitude a time or two," she replied in a breathy voice, "but don't let that stop you. A lady never gets tired of having her ego stroked."

Though he had a smile on his face, the eyes Joseph turned her way were cold. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind. I have a favor to ask, my dear. A favor that you are uniquely qualified to grant. Of course, it goes without saying that I'm counting on your discretion. I don't want any tongues wagging, nor do I want you to feel you have to violate your self-imposed vow of celibacy. But it would be nice if you somehow got past our Mr. Corsi's barriers and encouraged his confidence. I would be extremely interested in finding out if he has any secrets I should know."

The words were an order, not a request. So much for his concern about Ruby's love life. Laura should have known better than to believe that Joseph had an altruistic bone in his body, or that he was bothered by Ruby's monastic lifestyle. Everything he did, he did with a what-was-in-it-for-him attitude. She'd be foolish to forget that.

"My break is almost over," she said, swinging her feet off the chair. "If you don't mind, I think I'll go to the ladies' room and put my face back together."

"Not at all. I hope you'll take into consideration what we were just speaking about."

"Of course."

Flashing him a brilliant smile, Laura walked away. Once safely in the ladies' room, she sank back against a stall door and groaned out loud. There was nothing for it. She would have to flirt with Michael Corsi. She would have to find out something about the man to report to Joseph. If she didn't, he would grow suspicious.

Her stomach clenched as a more disturbing thought occurred to her. What if Michael took her flirtation seriously? What if he wanted more than flirting from her? What would she do then? Joseph would surely encourage any such liaison.

She was Joseph Merrill's lover, she reminded herself. At least, that's what everyone believed. Michael Corsi, if he valued his job, would be careful about crossing that line. The thought reassured her.

She had to look at this as an opportunity. An opportunity to win Joseph's confidence. Flirting with Michael Corsi—discreetly, of course—meant she was one step closer to ending the case, one step closer to going home. One step closer to her vacation.

And if, when that time came, she found herself slapping handcuffs on Joseph's newest employee, she would do so gladly.

Chapter 2

She arrived on a gentle cloud of perfume that made his head spin. Antonio didn't have to glance up from the figures he was tallying to know who stood at his side. Only she could smell this good.

Patiently she waited for him to acknowledge her presence. When he finally did raise his gaze to her, he saw that, up close and personal, Ruby O'Toole looked even better than she did from a distance. And she smelled heavenly.

Damn. He was going to have a hell of a time maintaining his objectivity around her. Not to mention keeping his hands to himself.

"You did a nice job today," she said. "Joseph is pleased."

Her smile, though warm, didn't quite reach her eyes. Because her face was so enchanting, he doubted most people even noticed. He probably wouldn't have noticed himself, if he hadn't been trained to do so, and if he hadn't already been on guard against her.

On the other hand, her voice was like liquid smoke. It did things to his insides that should have been illegal.

"Thank you." His voice came out raspy, and he cleared his throat. "Need a drink," he lied, quickly raising the glass of water to his mouth.

When he replaced the drained receptacle on the podium, she extended her hand. "I'm Ruby O'Toole."

The fingers she slid into his palm were soft and supple, her nails perfectly manicured and coated by a pale-pink polish the color of her suit. It was obvious that Ruby O'Toole had never toiled in the trenches like other mere mortals.

"I know who you are," he said.

Her eyebrows arched delicately. "You do?"

"Your reputation precedes you."

Again that arch. "My reputation?"

"For beauty. And charm."

She looked pleased. "I thought it was time we met, since we're going to be working closely together."

Despite the recent drink, his mouth went dry. "We are?"

"Very closely. You have my word, Mr. Corsi, that before the week is over, you and I will be on exceedingly intimate terms."

Antonio nearly did a double take. He stared at her, not quite ready to believe what his gut, and the uncontrollable pounding of his heart, were telling him. Was she coming on to him?

"What kind of intimate terms are those?" he asked carefully, ignoring the exceedingly intimate visions of entwined limbs and naked body parts dancing across the viewing screen of his mind. He wasn't a man who jumped to conclusions. If time permitted, which sometimes it didn't, he always made sure to weigh the necessary evidence before taking action.

Her eyes widened in mock innocence. "Why, business terms, of course. What other terms could they be? After all, I hardly know you, Mr. Corsi. We haven't even been properly introduced."

The woman was good. Damn good. He would give her that much.

"Call me Michael. After all, we are going to be on intimate business terms."

"Michael," she said slowly, as if savoring the feel of his name on her tongue. "And you must call me Ruby."

"Very well, Ruby. Tell me, what exactly are these business terms we will be sharing so intimately?"

“Assessing the estates Joseph purchases. I value all the artwork and jewelry. Joseph plans on using you to value the furniture and glassware. We’ll be working side by side. I’m looking forward to it. Peter, the man you replaced, could be such a dull boy. I’m counting on you to liven things up.”

He glanced over to where Joseph stood, talking into his cell phone. A new thought occurred to him. Had his boss put Ruby up to this? An initial test of his loyalty, perhaps?

Antonio decided it was time to learn what this woman was really up to. And just how far she would go with Joseph standing so close by. Since she was eyeing him as if he was the main course on her menu, he decided he would return the favor.

She didn’t flinch. In fact, the longer and the harder he looked, the more she seemed to preen. And the faster his heart thundered.

“See enough?” she finally asked coyly.

“You wanted me to look,” he replied, glancing again at his boss, who was still deep in conversation with whomever he was speaking to on the phone.

Ruby had obviously seen him eyeing Joseph, because she said, “If you’re worried about him, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. I promise. If you want to look again, at a later time, I won’t tell.”

Disgust washed through him. He couldn’t believe it. Her lover stood not ten feet away, and she’d all but invited Antonio to jump her bones. Was it just hours ago that he’d anticipated such a welcome from her? He didn’t need this. Not here. Not now. Not ever. He had more important things to occupy his mind than the unwanted advances of his boss’s mistress.

His own relationships might be fleeting. They might never have the altar as their ultimate goal. The nature of his work—erratic hours, multiple disguises and false identities—all but demanded it be that way. Still, he did practice fidelity when he was with a woman, and he expected the same respect from her.

Did Ruby O’Toole have no moral backbone? How had he ever thought he was attracted to her? Right now it was all he could do not to let his feelings show on his face.

He was behaving out of character—Michael Corsi could handle women like Ruby in his sleep—and that had to stop right now. Besides, he should be glad his personal feelings were no longer going to be a problem where she was concerned. He could concentrate solely on the job he was sent here to do, without the bother of unnecessary complications.

It was obvious he hadn’t hidden his feelings as well as he’d thought, because she said, “Perhaps, Michael, I’ve given you the wrong impression. Regardless of what you might be thinking right now about my dubious moral character, I’m not easy. What I am is an incorrigible flirt. Ask anyone, and they’ll tell you. Ask Joseph. I don’t mean anything by it. And I never follow through, except with the man in my life.”

While it didn’t surprise him that she had resorted to damage control, especially if Joseph had ordered her actions, it did amaze him that she’d admitted so readily what she was. Despite that, he felt an uncontrollable urge to shake her up a bit. Turnabout was fair play, after all.

“Where I come from, we have another word for what you’re doing,” he murmured.

“What word is that?”

“Teasing. Didn’t anyone ever teach you what happens to teasers?”

A defiant light lit her eyes. “No. What happens to them?”

“They often find themselves in sticky situations. The kind where they could easily get hurt.”

She gave a nonchalant shrug. “I’ve survived so far.”

He gritted his teeth. “I can see that you have. So tell me, Ruby, why are you an incorrigible flirt?”

“It’s simple, really.” She gave a delicate shrug. “I like having men look at me, and I like looking back.”

Antonio recalled the way her smile hadn’t quite reached her eyes. “Really?”

Her gaze grew watchful. “Yes, really. What other reason could there be?”

This time, he was the one who shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe you flirt so blatantly with men because you want to keep them at arm's length. Is there a reason you don't want a man close?"

She looked taken aback. When she spoke, however, her voice was calm.

"You're forgetting one thing. I'm very close to Joseph. And he's very possessive of his belongings."

How close was she, really? Close enough to possess the secrets Antonio needed to learn?

"So I've heard. Never fear, Ruby. You may be on display, but I have no intention of sampling the merchandise."

Before she could comment, Joseph joined them. Behind him, standing at a respectful distance, was his shadow, Matthew Rogers. Antonio wondered if Ruby had to send the man out on made-up errands, just to get some time alone with Joseph. The irreverent thought cheered him.

Clasping Antonio's hand, Joseph gave it an effusive shake. "Nice job, Michael. Very nice job."

"Thank you, sir."

Joseph turned to Ruby. "I just got off the phone with Howard Cabot. We got the Bickham estate."

"That's wonderful, darling," she exclaimed, rushing into his arms. "You've been negotiating with the heirs for months now. All your hard work has finally paid off."

"Yes, it has." Joseph broke the embrace and stood back to survey the two of them. "I'm sure you'll both understand that in this case, time is of the essence. I want the whole place catalogued, valued and auctioned off before the heirs have a chance to change their minds. Pack your bags, you two. You leave first thing Tuesday morning."

A shout from the other side of the room claimed Joseph's attention, which was a good thing, since it prevented him from seeing the look of dismay that crossed Antonio's face.

"We're having dinner together later?" he asked Ruby when he turned back.

"Of course."

"I'll see you then." He nodded to Antonio. "I'll leave it to the two of you to work out the fine details of the trip. Sorry to run, but as you can see, I'm needed elsewhere."

Antonio stared after Joseph's departing figure. He'd just started his job, and already Joseph was sending him out of town. Was something big going to happen while he was gone? Was that why Joseph was sending him away?

"Where's the Bickham estate?" he asked.

"A tiny town in the extreme southeastern tip of West Virginia," Ruby replied.

"How big is it?"

"In the ten-million-dollar range. Excluding the house and grounds, of course." She sounded as disheartened by the whole thing as he was.

"So it's not something we can value in a day and be home in time for dinner."

"We'll be lucky if we'll be done in three days, and that's working overtime."

Great. Just great. Still, it gave him a chance to prove himself to Joseph, and early on in the game, too. It also gave him a chance to get to know Ruby better. Much as he found her character lacking, it was an opportunity he'd be foolish to ignore.

"What kind of car do you drive?" he asked, turning his attention to her.

"Corvette. A two-seater. Why?"

"I gather you don't pack light." His voice was dry.

"You gather right." She looked amused.

"Then we'd better take my truck. It'll give us more room."

Her look of amusement fled. "Your truck?"

"Yes. That a problem?"

"It's a long drive to the Bickham estate, a lot of it through mountainous terrain. It'll probably take us six hours, not counting rest stops, to get there."

Just his luck to be trapped in a vehicle with her for six hours. At least it wouldn't be a cramped Corvette.

"I assure you, the ride will be quite comfortable. I also have a cap over the bed. You could bring along ten suitcases, and there would still be room. Can't say that about your Corvette, can you?"

"Hardly," she replied.

"You weren't thinking I'd make you ride in the back, were you?" he couldn't help chiding.

Her chin went up. "A gentleman would never do that."

Now was as good a time as any to let her know that he might be more than he presented himself to be. That, if given the right incentive, he might be willing to cross the line from lawfulness into illegality.

"Who said I'm a gentleman?"

"My mistake." Her voice was downright frosty.

"Is 8:00 a.m. okay with you, or do you need more beauty sleep?"

Now she was the one gritting her teeth. He'd obviously struck a nerve. Good. He didn't know why he felt the need to get a rise out of her, he just did.

"Eight o'clock is fine." She turned on her heel and hurried off in the direction Joseph had taken.

"See you then," he called after her.

Watching her retreating figure, Antonio wanted to kick himself. What had happened to his detachment? Why had he made his distaste for her so obvious? Why had he goaded her the way he had?

He had spent hundreds of hours sitting and waiting, watching criminals until just the right moment to strike and take them down. He had dealt with the scum of the earth—street-corner drug dealers who would peddle their wares to anyone, even children—and he hadn't let his true feelings show. On the contrary, he'd done everything in his power to convince them he was one of them.

But in a mere matter of seconds he had let Ruby O'Toole wriggle under his skin. Even worse, he'd let his aversion to her get in the way of the job he had to do.

No matter what his feelings for her, he had to heal the breach between them. He had to make something good come out of their enforced togetherness.

Because auctions were held every Saturday, employees at the Merrill Auction Gallery had Sunday and Monday off. That gave Antonio two days to come up with a plan. Starting first thing Tuesday morning, he would try to get to know Ruby, to gain her trust. She was an important link in the chain comprising Joseph Merrill's business dealings, a link he couldn't afford to overlook.

She had been right about one thing, he thought, as he gathered up his belongings: for at least three days next week they would be working very closely together. Four days, if you included travel time. Four days in Ruby O'Toole's company was bound to test his patience, not to mention his resolve. It might very well drive him mad.

For his sanity's sake, he hoped she left that intoxicating perfume at home.

Even though Ruby was not the type to carry her luggage to the curb, on Tuesday morning Laura made certain she was waiting there a full ten minutes before Michael Corsi's expected arrival. The last thing she wanted was for him to come knocking on her apartment door. Though the sparsely furnished rooms suited Laura just fine, they lacked the frills and finishing touches that would undoubtedly grace any dwelling where Ruby resided.

As a precaution only, Laura thought it best not to raise any further questions in Michael's mind. The man had already proven that he was no slouch when it came to his powers of observation.

Promptly at eight o'clock, a gold, late-model Chevrolet Silverado pulled to the curb. After countless spine-numbing rides in the ancient pickup her brother had owned when they were teenagers, she was pleasantly surprised to find that Michael Corsi's vehicle looked quite comfortable. In fact, if she wasn't mistaken, the engine practically purred. There wasn't a hanging muffler or a worn-out spring in sight.

Laura met his gaze through the windshield. Just the sight of his handsome face made her heart flip-flop. She couldn't even comfort her guilty conscience by arguing that he reminded her of her late husband. Michael Corsi was nothing like Jacob, in either looks or manner. Still, good guy or not, and whether she wanted to or not, something deep inside her couldn't help responding whenever she saw him.

And she was going to be stuck in close quarters with him for the next four days. How would she ever cope?

She wasn't deluded about the real reason Joseph had sent her and Michael away together. Yes, the Bickham estate needed valued, and valued soon. But it also gave Joseph the perfect opportunity to force her to spend time alone with Michael.

It wasn't going to be as easy as Joseph expected. If the expression she'd glimpsed in Michael's eyes on Saturday, and the way he'd deliberately goaded her, were anything to go by, active dislike was the predominant emotion Ruby stirred in him.

Laura was honest enough to admit that her behavior definitely had something to do with that reaction. She had gone a bit overboard in her flirtation with him. A bystander might even be compelled to say that she'd come on entirely too strong. It had been a self-defense mechanism, a way to protect herself—exactly what Michael himself had said she was doing. But from what did she need protection? He was certainly no danger to her.

Worse than the way she'd come on to Michael, however, was the manner in which she had done it. She'd hardly been discreet. It had been pure luck that few people had been around at the time, and that no one had seemed to notice, not even Joseph, although she couldn't be sure about Matthew.

She had to find a way to make peace with Michael. The next few days would be excruciating if they were constantly at each other's throats.

Besides, alienating him the way she had wouldn't get her job done. It wouldn't get her closer to any secrets he might have, such as his real involvement with Joseph. Like it or not, the job had to come first, and her personal feelings last.

To that end, she was determined to be civil to him, no matter how great the provocation. She wouldn't let him get to her the way he had on Saturday. She wouldn't make any more stupid mistakes. She would calmly, coolly and rationally do the work that both Joseph and the police department expected her to do.

A soft click announced the opening of the driver's side door. Seconds later the man who had occupied far too many of her thoughts over the past three days was standing before her.

One foot still in the street, Michael balanced the other on the curb. Leaning forward slightly, he squinted at her in the bright sunlight while he slid his right hand into his pants pocket and draped his left arm negligently across a parking meter.

He really had no business standing that way, Laura decided, as she shielded her eyes from the sun and tried to ignore the way her pulse leaped. It was too provocative by far. The material of his faded blue jeans strained against his muscled thighs in a way that drew her eyes upward to an area they had no business being drawn to.

As if that wasn't bad enough, once she'd torn her gaze away from the danger zone, she found herself entranced by the way his navy-blue T-shirt hugged an impressive chest, muscular biceps and trim waist. The force of Michael Corsi's masculinity practically shimmered like a wave of heat on the air. If it had been a virus, no female over the age of consent would have been immune.

Laura had always reveled in her sexuality while Jacob was alive. Since his death she had submerged that part of her nature. Obviously, in Michael Corsi's presence, it was trying to resurface. Whether she wanted it to or not.

She'd lost her husband and her child. Much as she had wished they would, her feelings and emotions hadn't died along with them. She was a woman, and she possessed all the requisite feminine

responses. While she might not be ready to resume that part of her life, she shouldn't beat herself up over a normal, healthy, human reaction.

The way Michael Corsi made her feel was a nuisance, like a nosebleed or the hiccups. The good news was, she knew how to handle such nuisances. If she ignored the unwanted emotions he aroused in her, they'd simply go away.

"You're on time," he drawled, by way of greeting.

His eyes were hooded, hiding his expression from her. The neutral tone of his voice gave nothing away.

"You're on time," she replied. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"No reason, except..."

The way he let his words trail off told her he hadn't been about to pay her a compliment. Here they went again. So much for her effort at civility.

"Except what?" she couldn't help asking.

He shrugged. "You're that kind of woman."

"The habitually late kind?"

"No," he replied evenly. "The high-maintenance kind. In my experience, they're rarely on time."

She had no business being offended. After all, he'd pegged Ruby to a T. Which meant she was doing a bang-up job of being her alter ego. She should be pleased.

"I am a high-maintenance woman," she said stiffly. "I'll be the first to admit it. But I'm also a woman who takes her job seriously. Whether you believe it or not, Michael, I earn every penny Joseph pays me. I might keep a man waiting for a date, but I am always on time for work."

He took his foot off the curb and straightened to his full height. "I apologize," he said, then surprised her by smiling ruefully. "You might find this hard to believe, but I didn't set out this morning to antagonize you. Matter of fact, I promised myself I would be on my best behavior."

His smile and his honesty disarmed her. Laura couldn't help laughing.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"We are. We're quite a pair, you and I. I promised myself the same thing."

His answering chuckle was appreciative. "Looks like neither of us is very good at keeping promises."

"Not this one, anyway," she agreed. "I owe you an apology, too. I don't know why I'm so prickly this morning."

"Forget it," he dismissed. "Want to give it another try?"

"Being civil to each other, you mean?"

He nodded. "We do have a long drive ahead of us. And, after that, several days of hard work. Things would go a lot smoother if we got along."

Laura had never had difficulty staying in character before. But somehow, when she wasn't paying attention, she'd lost Ruby. Again. She had to stop doing that. It was imperative. She couldn't afford to arouse Michael's suspicions. For all she knew, he was a plant Joseph had put in place to test her loyalty. She didn't want to flunk that test.

In Michael Corsi's presence, however, Laura Langley actually warred with Ruby O'Toole for equal time. That had to stop, too. As of yesterday.

"For Joseph's sake," she said, "if for nothing else, we really should try. But I have to be honest with you. I don't hold out much hope."

"Pessimist," he teased, his brown eyes gleaming with humor and his lips curling invitingly.

Laura's mouth went dry. Oh, hell. Michael Corsi in aggravating mode was attractive enough. In teasing mode, he was downright adorable.

Forget civility, she decided. An abrasive Michael was far preferable to her peace of mind. And much easier on her conscience.

“Tell me something,” she said, racking her brain for a way to put his back up again. It shouldn’t be too hard, since Ruby’s merely drawing breath seemed to irritate him no end. “You’re not one of those men who object to a woman driving, are you?”

Ruby O’Toole would gladly relinquish the driver’s seat to any male who offered, but Laura Langley would go stir crazy if she had to sit in the passenger seat the entire trip. She needed something to distract her from her awareness of this man. Negotiating the hills and curves of the drive ahead should do the trick easily enough.

“I believe in equal-opportunity driving,” he replied.

Michael didn’t know it, but he’d just given her the opening she was searching for.

“A man after my own heart,” she drawled sweetly. “Why, if Joseph hadn’t staked a claim first, I’d probably be putty in your hands.”

She felt a surge of triumph at the flare of impatience that flashed in his eyes.

“I should warn you,” he said. “If you take a spell behind the wheel, you could break a nail.”

Bingo. “I’ll risk it.”

“Won’t it hamper your incorrigible flirting with the men in other cars? I’d hate to have you cramp your style.”

“I’ll manage.”

“I’m sure you will.” The words were not a compliment.

Laura suppressed a sigh of relief. The status quo had been recaptured. She was safe, at least for now.

“Damn,” Michael muttered, shaking his head. “I did it again, didn’t I? That truce lasted all of three seconds.”

Which suited her just fine. She glanced pointedly at her watch. “Don’t you think we should be going?”

Michael eyed the three suitcases at her feet. To his credit, he really did try. No uncivil comments were forthcoming, although she noticed he did have to bite his lip.

He even kept silent when his gaze ran over her short black skirt, which was cut low at the waistline to expose her belly button, and its matching skintight sleeveless mock turtleneck top. But when he got to her shoes, which consisted solely of a strap across her instep, another strap that buckled around her ankles, and three inch heels, apparently he could keep silent no longer.

“Nice work clothes,” he said with a smirk that would have done Elvis proud.

“Thank you,” she replied, unable to resist a last longing look at his jeans and T-shirt. She would have killed to be able to wear jeans and a T-shirt. Ruby O’Toole, unfortunately, wouldn’t be caught dead in them. Under any circumstances.

More than the impractical clothing, what Laura really hated was having to spend an hour every morning putting herself together. It was such a pain having to keep her nails manicured and perfectly painted, her hair styled and her makeup just so. It was beyond her why women wasted all that time on their outward image.

Laura had always prided herself on being more interested in a person’s character than his or her appearance. She preferred substance over style. Unfortunately, had she played herself instead of Ruby, she never would have captured Joseph’s attention. Or Michael’s.

“You really like my outfit?” she asked. Flashing him Ruby’s patented smile, she smoothed her hands down her skirt. While the movement was made to look alluring, in reality it was a disguised attempt at pushing the tight fabric farther down her thighs. Even though she showed more skin in a bathing suit, the outfit still made her feel extremely self-conscious.

“It’s a Benton Thomas original,” she added, when he didn’t reply.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m not up on the current fashion designers. Aren’t you afraid of ruining your clothes? The last time I appraised an estate, it involved dank basements and dusty attics.”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “That’s what they have dry cleaners for.”

“There are some miracles even dry cleaners can’t perform.”

He might disparage the way she was dressed, but he couldn’t hide the gleam of appreciation in his eyes at the way the outfit flattered her figure. The gleam would have definitely pleased Ruby. Though she fought it, and despite her avowal of preferring substance over style, it pleased Laura, too.

“In that case,” she said airily, “there’s always Joseph. He’ll replace it if I ask. He takes good care of me.”

Michael’s lip curled. “And you’re a woman who needs a man to take care of her.”

So that’s what he objected to. She’d have to play that angle up every chance she got.

“Doesn’t every woman?”

“Say that to my sister, Kate, and she’ll likely scratch your eyes out.”

Bravo for Kate. Laura was squarely in her corner.

“I take it your sister’s a card-carrying feminist?”

“My sister is a woman who believes she can do anything as well as a man.”

Wide-eyed, Laura asked, “Isn’t that the same thing?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he nodded curtly toward her suitcases. “You want me to put those in the back?”

She gave him an obliging smile that she knew set his teeth on edge. “If you don’t mind.”

Muttering something she couldn’t catch beneath his breath, Michael tugged the suitcases to the back of the truck. She waited patiently by the closed passenger door while he placed them inside. It didn’t take him long to get the hint. With a long-suffering sigh, he came around to her side and yanked the door open.

“Thank you,” she said.

She realized her mistake the minute she faced the truck. In her zeal to play Ruby to a T, and to push Michael’s buttons, she’d forgotten that it was a long way up into the passenger seat. Her skirt was short. And tight. Laura felt Michael’s gaze burning along her legs as she climbed into the cab with as much decorum as possible.

Her temper was boiling and her cheeks hot by the time she’d settled herself comfortably.

“Enjoy the view?” The words were Laura’s, but they were said in Ruby’s teasing manner.

“A gentleman never looks,” he replied, deadpan.

“I thought we agreed on Saturday that you’re no gentleman.”

He allowed himself a smug smile. “We did, didn’t we?”

On that infuriating remark, he closed her door. A minute later he was behind the wheel.

“Buckle up.”

While she did just that, he picked up a sheaf of papers from the seat.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“A map.”

“A map?”

He nodded. “I got it off the Internet. It gives us door-to-door directions to our destination.”

“I can’t believe it,” she said.

He studied the page for a second, then, sounding distracted, replied, “What can’t you believe?”

“You’re a man. Men don’t read maps.”

“That’s a highly sexist remark.”

“It’s also the truth,” she stated.

“No, it’s not.”

“What is the truth, then?”

“When a man sets off for an unknown destination, he always consults a map. What he doesn’t do is ask for directions if he gets lost. Trust me, Ruby, if we lose our way, I promise to drive around for hours until we find it again.”

Laura gave her head a rueful shake. She'd wanted things back to the status quo, and back to the status quo they definitely were. Boy were they ever.

At least now the impulse to throw herself into his arms had passed. Unfortunately, it had been replaced by the urge to wrap her hands around his throat.

Chapter 3

Two hours into the drive, Antonio handed the wheel over to Ruby.

As had been the case during his spell as driver, they rode in silence, without even the radio to dispel the tension between them. At some point he would have to ask her about Joseph, but now was too soon. Way too soon. If he tried to pump her, she'd only grow even more closemouthed, if that was possible. Not to mention that his probing would inevitably raise her suspicions.

They were going to be alone together for the next several days. He had to use that time wisely. What he needed to do was engage her in small talk. Small, civil talk. If such a thing was possible between the two of them.

He needed to get her to relax. If she relaxed in his company, maybe then she would let her guard down low enough to reveal something of value. He would just bide his time and wait. He was good at biding his time and waiting for the proper moment.

Still, even to him, two-plus hours of silence was biding one's time just a tad too long. There was a huge difference between waiting for the proper moment and wasting the time at hand. Especially when, on a job like this, even one wasted second could mean the difference between life and death.

"Well, what do you think?" he finally asked.

She glanced over at him. "About what?"

"My truck. How does it handle?"

She smiled. In that brief, unguarded, upward curl of her lips, he glimpsed the first honest emotion, other than her displeasure with him, that he'd seen on her face since their gazes had first met across the crowded auction floor. If only she would smile like that always, instead of bestowing that forced, brittle tilt of her lips that passed for coyness.

She made quite a picture in her short, tight skirt, and even tighter top. Her long legs seemed to stretch to eternity, and her equally long arms seemed made solely for wrapping themselves around a man's neck. She was, quite easily, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Everything inside of him even remotely related to his Y chromosome responded to that beauty.

Then she spoiled it all by speaking.

"How does it handle? Like a man's cheeks after a close shave."

Antonio's awareness of her was swept away on a wave of irritation. And women accused men of being single-minded. Didn't she have at least one thought in her head that didn't relate to sex?

While sex had been the ultimate goal of all of his relationships, the women he'd been involved with had, without exception, expressed an avid interest in something besides themselves. Those varied interests had made for some lively and interesting debates. He'd enjoyed their company, enjoyed spending time with them both in and out of the bedroom.

Ruby O'Toole really had no substance, he realized, wondering at his disappointment.

"It has great power on these hills," she said, then paused. "You're into power, aren't you?"

He felt his brow furrow. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," she replied with a shrug.

He hated it when women said that, because he knew that their "nothing" definitely meant something. Forget about Ruby relaxing with him. He was beginning to think it would take a strong sedative to get him to relax with her. Either that, or he'd have to get blinding, stinking drunk. At this juncture in their relationship, he wasn't averse to either idea.

"No, really," he said. "I'm curious. What do you mean when you say I'm into power?"

She heaved an audible sigh. "Only that, like most men, you like to be in charge."

"You mean I'm a control freak."

"Don't be offended. The need for power is a man's number-one craving."

"What about sex?"

She didn't take her gaze off the road. "That's number three."

"Number three?"

"Oh, men like to believe that sex is number one, because they spend so much time thinking about it, but it's really number three."

Folding his arms across his middle, he shifted in his seat so he could stare directly at her. "And number two is?"

"Money."

He drew a deep breath. "So what you're saying is that everything a man does, everything I do, is a direct result of my craving for power?"

"Exactly." Her voice warmed to her theme. "Men join gangs, they make weapons, they wage war. They buy fancy sports cars or big, monster trucks, preferably with stick shifts in them, to prove how macho they are. They do all this, because they need to feel powerful."

"You'll notice," he said, nodding toward the dashboard, "this truck doesn't have a stick shift." What he didn't bother telling her was that this particular model only came with automatic transmission.

"Doesn't matter," she replied blithely. "It doesn't change the symbolism."

"The symbolism being," he said with exaggerated patience, "that this truck represents my need for power?"

"Of course."

Antonio felt the beginnings of a headache. What crazy impulse had deluded him into thinking he could make small talk with her? He had no one to blame but himself. After all, she had been exceedingly "friendly" toward him at the beginning. That friendliness was what had gotten him so bent out of shape. And why? Simply because she wasn't the type of person he'd hoped she'd be.

He was the one who had blown it by not bothering to disguise what he really thought of her. Obviously, if her continued prickliness around him, and the way she was goading him this very minute, were anything to go by, Ruby was the type who held grudges.

Even though he knew he was being deliberately taunted, he couldn't let it go. "How does this truck symbolize my need for power?"

"Take its size, for instance."

"What about it?"

She waved an arm. "Extended cab. A body that stands over six feet off the ground. Nobody traveling behind you, except a guy in an eighteen-wheeler, can see over you. Or around you. Face it, Michael, you're making a statement with this vehicle."

If he kept gritting his teeth this way, his dentist was going to make a fortune. "I am?"

"Yes. You're saying you want to own the road, and everybody else better get out of your way. Driving this truck makes you feel powerful."

"What about women?" he challenged. "Don't they crave power?"

"It's their number-one craving also. But they have to go about getting it more subtly. This is a male-dominated society, you know."

"How does a woman go about getting power?"

"Pandering to a man's ego. Dressing nicely for him and maintaining her figure. Letting a man think she's small and helpless. But mainly through sex."

"Is that what you're doing with Joseph?" he asked softly. "Asserting your need for power?"

She didn't blink. "Of course."

The thought of her in Joseph Merrill's arms made him want to smash his fist into something. Preferably Joseph's jaw.

Antonio decided he'd had enough small talk. It certainly wasn't getting him anywhere he wanted to go. Reaching into the glove compartment, he brought out a crossword puzzle book and a mechanical

pencil. At least these puzzles he could decipher. They didn't try his patience the way a certain brunette did.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He pulled a lap board out from under the seat and opened the book to a fresh page. Tapping the pencil against the board, he read the first clue.

"Working a crossword puzzle."

"You like crossword puzzles?"

He filled in the answer before replying. "Yes, I do."

"I don't care too much for puzzles."

He looked over at her. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "Too much work. I'd rather spend my time doing other things."

"Like your hair and your nails, you mean?" he asked snidely.

"Absolutely," she agreed.

Silence settled around them once more.

"You wouldn't happen to know a six-letter word for an igneous rock composed of labradorite and augite, would you?" he asked a few minutes later.

"Gabbro," she replied immediately, seemingly without thinking.

Antonio sat up straight in his seat. When he glanced over at her, her gaze was focused on the winding road. For a woman who professed not to like crossword puzzles, she knew the answer to a fairly obscure clue. Yet another mystery for him to solve.

"Would you mind spelling that?" he asked carefully.

She did. He checked, and the word fit.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"I must have seen it on a game show." There was a sudden cautiousness in her voice.

"A game show?" He didn't bother to hide his skepticism.

"I just love game shows, don't you?" she gushed. "Especially the ones where you can win a lot of money."

"Ah, yes, man's number-two need," he drawled.

"Exactly."

"You have an interesting take on the human condition."

She looked at him out of the corner of one eye. "What take is that?"

"That every man, and woman for that matter, is solely out for him or herself. Power, money, sex, they're all that matter. If you don't look out for number one, no one else will. Let me know, please, if I'm mistaken."

"No. You've summed it up quite nicely."

"Tell me," he asked. "How did you come by this conclusion?"

"What's it matter to you?"

It mattered because, as far as he was concerned, the way she was wasting her life on a man who shouldn't deserve her was an even bigger crime than the one that very same man was allegedly committing.

"It doesn't, really. I was just curious. Did you pick your theory out of thin air? Or did you formulate it after exhaustive study? Perhaps you wrote your doctoral thesis on the topic."

"Now you're mocking me."

He gazed at her seriously. "How am I mocking you?"

"I didn't go to college."

"How could I know that?" he asked softly, although he was well aware, from reading about her in the dossier on Joseph Merrill, that Ruby O'Toole did not possess a college degree. "All I know about you is that you work for Joseph and that, in your words, you belong to him."

He knew one other thing. She was smarter than she let on. Did part of her strategy for snaring Joseph also include acting dumb?

“If you must know,” she told him, “I’ve earned the right to hold the opinions I do. The right of experience.”

“You certainly are experienced,” he muttered.

“Did you say something?”

He looked down at the puzzle. “Just talking to myself.”

“Can I ask you something, Michael?”

“Sure.”

“Why are you so upset? Are you really going to sit there and try to convince me that you and I don’t share the same philosophy about the human condition?”

Her words brought him up short. Way short. How could he have been so stupid? So careless? He’d nearly gone and blown it all by getting his underwear in a twist. From now on, he would have to tread extremely carefully while in her presence. Ruby O’Toole could pull him out of character faster than a magician could pull a rabbit out of his hat.

And if she started thinking about the contradictions... He had to change his tune, but fast.

“You’re right,” he conceded, hoping to sound rueful, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “I do share your philosophy. But no man likes to be seen through so easily. It’s a blow to his ego. I was annoyed. I suppose I was trying to get a rise out of you.”

“That’s what I thought,” she replied.

“You were wrong about one thing, though,” he said.

“What?”

“Power is not my number-one need. Money is. If I have enough money, I can buy all the power I need.”

She bestowed a superior smile on him. “If you say so.”

He felt the need to have the last word. “Could I offer you a caution?”

“Of course.”

“I recommend you not share your philosophy with Joseph.”

Her laughter was light and amused. “Trust me, Michael. I would never be so blunt with a man I’m seeing romantically.”

No, he thought sourly. She’d just bat those impossibly long eyelashes of hers at him, and he’d dissolve into a puddle of testosterone need.

Just an hour ago he’d been certain he knew all there was to know about Ruby O’Toole. But after her discourse on man’s and woman’s need for power—and after telling him how much she needed to sublimate all her wants and desires to those of the man who would take care of her—he wasn’t certain at all. Then there was her disclaimer about any knowledge of an advanced crossword puzzle clue, followed by her calling him on the carpet for acting out of character.

He wasn’t about to go so far as admitting that there might be some depth to her, after all. But he would concede he didn’t know everything he thought he did.

Just who are you, Ruby O’Toole? More important, what are you up to? What secrets do you know? And how do I get you to tell them to me?

They stopped for lunch at a diner outside of Beckley, West Virginia. To Antonio’s surprise, Ruby ordered a cheeseburger, French fries and a chocolate shake. He watched in silence as she took a bite of her cheeseburger, then closed her eyes. A look of rapture crossed her face, and she chewed lustily.

Even though he didn’t like her all that much, Antonio felt the stirring of arousal at the sight. His own food forgotten, he sat back in his chair and watched her. When a rivulet of juice ran down her chin, he had to fight the urge to lean forward and taste it for himself. Did she make love with as much abandon as she ate?

“Napkin?” He plucked one from the receptacle on the table and thrust it toward her.

“Thanks.” She took the proffered item from him with a smile. When her chin was dry, she asked, “Aren’t you hungry?”

He blinked. “What?”

She nodded toward his plate. “You haven’t eaten anything.”

Antonio picked up his club sandwich and took a bite. He didn’t taste a thing.

Ruby tossed him a curious glance before returning to her meal.

He didn’t know what was worse: the silence between them, during which his arousal continued to grow painfully as he covertly watched her, or the small talk that inevitably ended up in the opposite direction from the one he intended to take.

At least with small talk he’d have something else to concentrate on. If he just sat here, watching her eat, by the time they paid the bill he’d be so aroused he’d be walking funny.

Of course, with all the blood in his body centered in one vital organ, his powers of thought were severely limited at the moment. Still, if he tried hard enough, he should be able to come up with something to say.

“You’re really going to eat all that food?” was the brilliant opening he finally led with.

She arched an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t I?”

Antonio tried to sound nonchalant. “It’s not exactly low in fat. I just assumed, like most women, you spend all your time watching your figure.”

Ruby picked up a French fry. Tilting her head back, she opened her mouth. Three clean bites with her incredibly straight teeth, and the French fry disappeared. Antonio was sweating by the time she swallowed.

“Watching my figure is for men to do,” she said, picking up another fry.

He welcomed the shaft of irritation that took his arousal down a few degrees. “You keep eating like that, all they’re going to watch is you ballooning up in size.”

“Hasn’t happened yet,” she said, dismissingly.

“Bad habits eventually catch up to us all.”

She gave him a curious glance. “So I’ve been told. Okay, Michael, I’m game. What should I be eating?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “A salad, maybe?”

“Rabbit food, you mean.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Yes.”

“I don’t find it filling. Besides, depending on what you put on a salad, it could have more fat than this cheeseburger. Were you aware of that?”

“I was just making an observation,” he said.

“You seem to make a lot of them.” She took a sip of her milkshake, then added, “Want to know the real secret of keeping your weight at a manageable level? It’s quite simple.”

“Sure.”

“Everything in moderation.”

“Everything in moderation,” he repeated.

She nodded. “You can eat foods high in fat, if you balance them out with fruits and vegetables. And exercise, of course.”

“Everything in moderation,” he murmured again, his gaze on his plate. He looked up. “Does that go for your love life, too?”

She met his gaze unflinchingly. “Sex life, you mean.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What you’re really asking about is my sex life.”

Here they were again: due east, when he'd thought they were headed west. He'd expected a typical Ruby comment along the lines of moderation having nothing to do with her love life. Instead she'd turned the tables on him.

Before he could frame an answer to her question, she asked him an even harder one. "Why are you so interested in my sex life?"

Because I want to be a part of it. Because I'm attracted to you, and I'm disappointed you're not the woman I need you to be in order to allow you to become a part of it.

"I've never met another woman quite like you." That, at least, was the truth. "I guess I'm just trying to understand you. Since you admittedly use sex to get power, I thought it was a fair question."

To his relief she looked pleased, rather than offended. Finally he'd said something right.

"It might be a fair question," she replied, "but I hope you'll understand if I decline to answer."

"Of course."

"Are you married?" she asked.

Antonio nearly choked on his iced tea. "You're asking me that now? After the way you came on to me Saturday?"

"So far as I remember, we never did establish your marital status," she replied. "Besides, I told you I'm an incorrigible flirt. Marital status isn't the first thought that enters my mind when I meet an attractive man."

He had no business being so pleased that she thought he was attractive. "Since you're already involved with someone, why should you care?"

"I'm just trying to figure you out...like you are with me. So," she asked again, "are you?"

He wondered what she would do if he told her the truth. That, to the endless frustration of his family, the thought of marriage always left him feeling claustrophobic. His life was crowded enough as it was. While the relatives of other undercover cops worried incessantly over their safety, his five brothers and his sister were terrified he'd never settle down. In this case, at least, Antonio's truth was also Michael's truth.

"Do I look like I'm married?"

Her smile grew broader. "Trust me. I know a lot of married men who neither look nor act married."

He'd just bet she did. "I see."

"I'll try one more time. Are you married, Michael?"

He was Michael Corsi, he reminded himself. It was about time he remembered it and acted accordingly.

"Hardly," he said, injecting as much disdain as he could into the word.

She tilted her head and eyed him carefully. "You got something against marriage?"

He spread his arms in a devil-may-care manner. "Nothing, except it would cramp my style."

"What is your style? Love 'em and leave 'em?"

"Some people have said that."

"Interesting," Ruby commented.

"What?"

"Obviously you see nothing wrong in being a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of guy, but you definitely find something wrong with my being an incorrigible flirt. Does anyone but me see a double standard at work here?"

She had a point, Antonio conceded. However, he could hardly tell her that he was the one who objected to her moral code, not Michael. Nor could he tell her that the only reason she knew of his disapproval was because she had managed to pull him out of character at least a thousand times since they met.

"The question is," he heard her say, "why are you a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of guy?"

He suddenly found himself feeling wary, although he couldn't identify the source of his reluctance. It was probably nothing more than his desire to remain in character and not blow it by saying something stupid. The way he had earlier.

He was Michael Corsi, he reminded himself yet again. He had to handle this question the way Michael would.

"Does there have to be a reason?"

"There's always a reason," Ruby stated. "In your case, my guess is that you have commitment issues."

He felt his eyebrows climb. "Commitment issues?"

She nodded. "You were probably burned by love in the past, and now you don't want to give your heart to any woman. You don't want to risk the pain. Either that or you hate women. But something tells me that isn't the case."

Relief filled him, and his wariness fled. She was so far from both the cover story he'd created for Michael and the truth of his own life he almost laughed out loud.

"I hate to burst your bubble, but I haven't been burned by love. And I don't hate women. I just happen to like things the way they are. Variety is the spice of life, you know."

In truth, he had never been in love. As a youth, he'd been too busy sowing his wild oats to commit to one relationship. As an adult, the demands of working undercover prevented him from being with a woman long enough to fall in love. Of course, he couldn't tell Ruby that.

"Since we're analyzing each other's supposed issues," he said, "maybe you'll answer the question I asked you on Saturday. Why are you an incorrigible flirt?"

"Are you really interested? Or are you trying to make me squirm, the way you were then?"

He bit back a smile. Leave it to Ruby not to let that one go by unchallenged. "I'm really interested." To his surprise it was true.

"It's not because I want to push people away, like you thought," she said.

"Then why is it?" he countered.

"Because of my past. My father was not a demonstrative man. My need for constant male appreciation stems from that lack."

"I guess I'm not that self-aware," Antonio said.

"Don't knock it till you try it. Who was it who wrote that the unexamined life isn't worth living?"

He stared at her. "You've read Socrates?"

There it was again, the sudden blankness of expression that hid her thoughts from him.

"Who's Socrates?"

"An ancient Greek philosopher," he answered automatically. "I suppose you heard that quote on a game show, right?"

"I suppose so."

Antonio knew he'd get nothing further from her in that regard. "Do incorrigible flirts get married?"

"To the right man," Ruby replied.

"Meaning a man with gobs of money. A man like Joseph."

"Of course. Some women aspire to be homemakers. Others aspire to a career. I aspire to marrying a millionaire."

"What about love?" he asked.

"What about it?" she said. "It doesn't seem to come very high on your list."

"But you're a woman. It's supposed to come high on yours."

She spared him a disgusted look. "That is, quite possibly, the most sexist thing any man has ever said to me. I think I need to make a phone call to your sister."

He grinned triumphantly at her, and understanding bloomed in her eyes.

"You're paying me back for my map remark, aren't you?"

“Perhaps,” he acknowledged. “Seriously, though. You really want a man to take care of you?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with being independent, of having a mind of your own? What’s wrong with taking care of yourself? You have a good job. You can afford it.”

His sister must have rubbed off on him more than he’d realized, Antonio reflected. Kate would be thrilled.

“I’ve gone as far as I can in my line of work,” Ruby said. “I have expensive tastes. I need a man to provide them.”

“You’d just be a trophy wife, you know,” he felt compelled to point out.

She used her straw to stir her milkshake. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“What happens when you grow older and your looks fade? What happens when Joseph, or another man just like him, trades you in on a newer model?”

“They call it a property settlement, Michael.”

She really was the most infuriating woman. Didn’t she want to better herself? Why was she wasting her potential on Joseph Merrill, and who knew how many other men just like him that she’d been with? Was the reason as simple as the one she’d stated? That her father never gave her the affection she craved?

The waitress brought their bill. After giving it a glance, Antonio placed enough money to cover the charge, plus a generous tip, on the table.

He nodded to Ruby. “Ready?”

“Just a minute.” She fished her wallet from her purse and placed several dollar bills on top of the ones he’d already left.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Adding to the tip.”

He stared at her in exasperation. Did she think he was a tightwad, out to stiff a person who had served them well?

“I already left twenty percent.”

“I know. But waitresses are notoriously underpaid. Every little bit extra helps.”

“Joseph won’t reimburse that.”

“I don’t care.” Standing, she made her way to the front of the diner.

Bemused, Antonio watched her for a long minute before following. By her own admission, she was a woman whose main goal in life was to marry a rich man, yet she’d thrown away her own money on a woman she would never see again. It galled him anew that she had such low expectations for herself.

As they walked to the truck, he decided to give it one last try.

“Not to beat a dead horse, but you’re throwing your life away, Ruby. Can’t you see that?”

She eyed him curiously. “You’re referring to my relationship with Joseph?”

“Yes.”

“Even if it is true, why should it bother you?”

Antonio stifled a curse. She’d done it again. She’d made him forget who he was supposed to be. And what he was supposed to be doing.

“Damned if I know,” he muttered.

“I guess this means you wouldn’t want an invitation to the wedding.”

He started. Had things gone that far between her and Joseph?

“Joseph has asked you to marry him?”

“Not yet. But it’s coming, I can feel it. Good thing I don’t need much lead time. When your brother’s a priest, you can be pretty flexible with your plans.”

He paused with his hand on the passenger door handle. “Your brother’s a priest?”

She dimpled. “Someone has to atone for my sins. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She climbed up into the truck, and he closed the door after her. As he buckled himself into the driver's seat, Antonio decided it was time to do the work he'd been sent here to do. His superiors had gone to great pains to make his cover just perfect. Hopefully, the reason Joseph had hired him was as much for his "past record" as for his abilities as an auctioneer.

"Maybe your brother could work on my sins," he said.

"You mean you're not the mild-mannered auctioneer everyone believes you to be?"

He started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot. "Is any man what he appears to be?"

"You do have a past, then."

"You could say that."

"A murky past," she observed, with obvious relish.

"I did some time once, back when I was young and stupid."

"How much time?"

"My sentence was five years, but I was released after serving thirty months. Good behavior."

"What were you convicted of?"

If she already knew, she wasn't letting on. "Possession, with the intent to sell."

Still no judgment on her face. "Were you a dealer?"

He had to tread carefully here. If she was, as he suspected, Joseph's eyes and ears on this trip, and if she was going to report back every word he said, he didn't want Joseph to think he was going to try to horn in on his business.

"From time to time I'd sell stuff."

"Why?"

"For the money, of course."

"What did your sister think of that?" she asked.

To make his cover story easier to remember, Antonio had given Michael the same five brothers and one sister that he had. "She hated it. Unlike me, she's pretty much of a straight arrow."

"Like my brother."

"Exactly."

"You said you were young and stupid," Ruby commented. "Does that mean you've reformed your ways?"

He chose his words carefully and for the greatest effect. "I like money, Ruby. Like I said earlier, it's my number-one need. Truth is, I'd do most anything to get it. I just won't be stupid enough to get caught again."

"I see," she said slowly.

"You sound disappointed."

"Why should I be disappointed?"

That's what he wondered.

Chapter 4

“Who lives out in the middle of nowhere like this?” Michael grouched as the truck hit a dip in the dirt road and gave an alarming bounce.

“An eccentric millionaire tired of the lights and noise of the city, that’s who,” Laura replied, holding on to the dashboard for dear life.

They had been driving along the narrow, winding and extremely bumpy road for more than fifteen minutes. On either side of the road stood tall trees that blocked most of the sunlight, tangled bushes—many with nasty-looking thorns—and a profusion of wildflowers. While the wildflowers were beautiful, and despite the No Trespassing signs posted at regular intervals, she still felt like she was in the middle of an overgrown jungle without a guide to see her safely through to the other side. She wouldn’t be surprised if, any minute now, they encountered a group of lions and tigers and bears. Oh, my.

A stray branch brushed along the side of the truck, and she saw Michael wince. In all likelihood, it would need a new paint job by the time they returned to Pittsburgh, and probably new shocks, as well. Heaven knew how Joseph was going to get his fleet of moving vans down this road.

“I understand needing to get away,” he said, “but did he have to escape this far?”

“If he had simply moved to the suburbs,” she pointed out, “people wouldn’t have labeled him eccentric.”

Laura knew the true cause of his distress, and it had little to do with the remoteness of their destination or the pounding his truck was taking, although he could be pretty weird about the vehicle. Two hours earlier he had spied a wriggling canvas bag by the side of the road. When they had stopped to investigate, they’d found two puppies inside.

At the sight, Michael had sworn furiously, then launched into a diatribe directed toward the soulless creatures who had abandoned the puppies along the side of the road, where they would either starve to death or be hit by a car. He had also insisted that he and Laura find the nearest humane society. He didn’t care how far out of their way it took them.

It was a side of him Laura hadn’t imagined existed, and it fascinated her. It also touched her deeply. She knew she would forever carry a picture around in her head of the way he had laughingly allowed the puppies to climb all over him and lick his face and hands. There was something terribly appealing about a man who got upset over a couple of puppies. An ex-con who loved animals. She supposed it was the gangster equivalent of the hooker with a heart of gold.

“You couldn’t keep them, Michael.”

He didn’t pretend not to understand. “I know.”

“You travel too much, work too many hours.”

“I know.”

“The shelter will find them a good home.”

“I know, Ruby.”

“But it doesn’t make you feel better.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

They hit a series of dips, and the truck began bucking like one of the crack addicts she’d wrestled to the ground early in her career with the NYPD. Michael’s arm shot out, pinning her securely against the seat. It wasn’t until he had brought the truck to an abrupt halt and she looked down that she realized his hand was cupped securely around her right breast.

For one breathless moment, she simply marveled at how smooth the skin of Michael’s hand seemed. Yet there was nothing weak or lazy about it. His fingers were long and extremely capable looking; his nails clean and neatly trimmed. She had never realized before how beautifully sculpted a man’s knuckles could be.

Then reality dawned, and Laura came to her senses. “Uh, Michael.”

“What?” He was staring at the terrain in front of them and sounded distracted.

“Your hand.”

“What about it?”

“Would you mind removing it from my...from me?”

An impatient twist of his head brought his gaze to hers. She looked pointedly down. Comprehension filled his eyes, along with an expression akin to horror. Michael snatched his hand from her body as if the contact burned.

“Sorry about that,” he mumbled, his cheeks taking on a ruddy hue. “When we hit those bumps... All I can say is, it was an automatic response.”

“I know, Michael.”

“I just want you to know I didn’t mean to...I had no intention of...I would never just...”

She gritted her teeth. Would it have been so awful if he had meant to touch her that way? Not that she wanted him to. Not by a long shot.

“I know, Michael.”

It wasn’t the warmth of his hand against her breast that unsettled her so. There had been nothing sexual in the gesture, just as there had been nothing sexual in her response to it. It was the protective nature of his reaching out to her that rattled her far more than if he had simply groped her.

She’d told him that her father had been undemonstrative and cold. But that was the story she had concocted for Ruby, to explain Ruby’s behavior. In truth, Laura’s father—and her mother—had been warm, caring and open when it came to expressing their love. A freak storm during her freshman year of college, when the roof of the store they were in collapsed, had taken them from her. A few years after that, she’d lost her husband and son. She still had her brother, who, like the mythical brother she had invented for Ruby, was a priest. But Alex, who was assigned to a church in New Mexico, was busy with his parishioners and their needs. Laura tried to impose on him as little as possible.

It troubled her to admit it, but after four years of depending on no one but herself, it had felt gloriously wonderful to have someone be concerned for her welfare. Even if the sign of that caring had come in the form of a hand closed around her breast. And even if that someone was Michael Corsi, a convicted felon who—if she’d understood him correctly, and she was fairly certain she had—was looking for another opportunity to skirt the law.

She covertly studied the man at her side, taking in his strong profile with its prominent Roman nose and determined chin. The muscles of his arms were well-defined. His shoulders were broad. If he wanted to, Michael Corsi could make one formidable protector.

Laura felt her mouth tighten grimly. What was that old cartoon saying? If only he had used his power for good, instead of evil. If only Michael had learned the error of his ways during his incarceration, then maybe... Her brain shied away from the thought.

Without warning he turned in his seat. They stared wordlessly at each other, and a sudden tension filled the cab. The restlessness that had been so much a part of her life of late took hold of Laura and refused to let go. She suddenly found herself wishing that he had tried to cop a feel. The outrage that action would have prompted would have left her immune to any unwelcome and inappropriate thoughts. At least, she believed it would. Unfortunately, nothing much had been making sense in her life recently.

Her confusion, and her chagrin about that confusion, put a bite into her voice. “Do me a favor. If we hit another series of bumps like that last set, would you please remember that I’m wearing a seat belt? I don’t need anything, or anyone, to hold me in place.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.