

SHAWNA  
DELACORTE

FALLING FOR  
THE ENEMY



*Desire*

Shawna Delacorte

**Falling For The Enemy**

«HarperCollins»

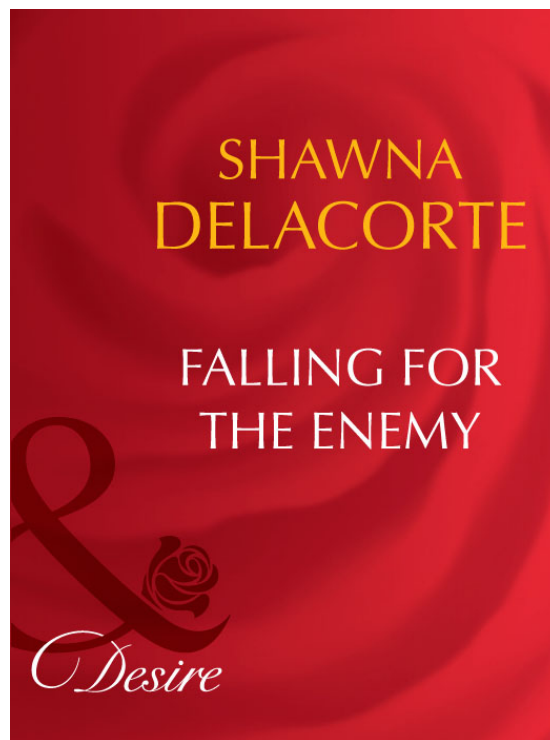
## **Delacorte S.**

Falling For The Enemy / S. Delacorte — «HarperCollins»,

Paige Bradford intended to expose Bryce Lexington for the ruthless shark he was. But when they started working together, the sparks they gave off jettisoned her best intentions. Paige knew this corporate hunk wasn't what he seemed - but was she losing her heart to the enemy? Hiring oh-so-sexy Paige might have been the biggest mistake Bryce had ever made, but he had to learn what she was after. Especially since she had Bryce - the man with everything - wanting something far more precious: Paige's love.

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## The Look On Bryce Lexington's Handsome Face Said It All.

He liked what he saw, liked it very much. Paige felt an inexplicable tingle of excitement as he continued to stare at her. She quickly pulled the beach jacket on, covering her body from shoulders to mid thigh.

"Tomorrow, Bradford..." Drew paused to take a calming breath. "Tomorrow bring your own swimsuit." He quickly turned and left the pool house without even pausing to look back.

Paige closed her eyes. The look of smoldering intensity that Drew had greeted her with popped back into her mind. A tremor of sensual desire made its way through her body, then settled low inside her.

Paige was not sure what she wanted anymore or why she was still there. She probably should have resigned as she had originally planned, but now it was too late.

Dear Reader,

Dog days of summer got you down? Chill out and relax with six brand-new love stories from Silhouette Desire!

August's MAN OF THE MONTH is the first book in the exciting family-based saga BECKETT'S FORTUNE by Dixie Browning. Beckett's Cinderella features a hero honor-bound to repay a generations-old debt and a poor-but-proud heroine leery of love and money she can't believe is offered unconditionally. His E-Mail Order Wife by Kristi Gold, in which matchmaking relatives use the Internet to find a high-powered exec a bride, is the latest title in the powerful DYNASTIES: THE CONNELLYS series.

A daughter seeking revenge discovers love instead in Falling for the Enemy by Shawna Delacorte. Then, in Millionaire Cop & Mom-To-Be by Charlotte Hughes, a jilted, pregnant bride is rescued by her childhood sweetheart.

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So find some shade, grab a cold one...and read all six passionate, powerful and provocative new love stories from Silhouette Desire this month.

Enjoy!



Joan Marlow Golan  
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

# **Falling for the Enemy**

## **Shawna Delacorte**



## **SHAWNA DELACORTE**

has delayed her move to Washington State, staying in the Midwest in order to spend some additional time with family. She still travels as often as time permits and is looking forward to visiting several new places during the upcoming year while continuing to devote herself to writing full-time. Shawna would appreciate hearing from her readers. She can be reached at 6505 E. Central, Box #300, Wichita, KS 67206-1924.



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## One

“Paige Bradford? I’m Bryce Lexington.” Bryce rose from his chair and held out his hand as she entered his office.

Even though he had seen her photograph in her personnel file, this incredibly beautiful woman was not what he had anticipated. Her firm handshake showed confidence. She appeared composed and at ease. Everything about her was a surprise and he instantly liked everything he saw. An unexpected tightness constricted his chest when their hands touched. He took a deep breath in an attempt to break the sensation. This unmistakable physical attraction toward her was both ill-timed and unacceptable considering the circumstances.

According to Joe Thompson, his corporate head of security, Paige had been surreptitiously prying into Bryce’s personal life for the past six months and two weeks ago had procured a job at his corporate headquarters in Santa Monica, California. Now she stood in his office on the other side of his desk looking as desirable as any woman he had ever met. What was her game? What was she after? Again, a quick rush of excitement darted through his body. He shoved it away and focused on the business at hand. He indicated a chair for her, then sat down behind his desk.

Paige settled into the chair he had indicated. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lexington.”

She had seen hundreds of pictures of him and read every word she could find that had been written about him—magazines, newspapers and even the Internet. None of it had prepared her for a face-to-face meeting with this dynamic man. Paige had accepted his handshake, then quickly withdrawn her hand from his grasp. An intimate warmth had traveled up her arm and spread through her body, leaving her momentarily unsure about her chosen course of action.

She clenched her jaw and rallied her determination. She would not allow his good looks and some errant twinge of unwanted desire to divert her from the all-important task she had set for herself. She would see to it that Bryce Lexington was held accountable for his actions. That the world would know he was nothing more than an unprincipled shark who was responsible for her father’s suicide.

“Your personnel file shows that you possess the educational background, skill level and computer experience necessary for the position as my administrative assistant. Our corporate policy is to promote from within whenever possible. Since you agreed to come in for the interview, I’ll take that to mean you’re interested in the position.”

“Yes, Mr. Lexington. I feel that—”

“Call me Bryce.”

“All right...Bryce. I’m extremely interested in the position and would consider it an honor to work as your administrative assistant. I have long admired your dedication to charity and your hard work in that regard.” She smiled, doing her best to project as much sincerity as she could muster and thankful that she hadn’t choked on the audacious lies.

“Do you have a current passport?”

“Yes.”

Without warning, he rose from his chair and moved to the office door. “That’s it, Bradford.”

His abrupt action startled her. “That’s what?”

“End of the interview. The job is yours effective immediately.” He glanced at his watch. “You have three hours to pack. We’re going to London and we’ll be gone for five days. Meet me at the company hangar at the airport. Get the directions from Eileen.” He opened the door and stepped aside, indicating that she was dismissed.

“I...uh, I appreciate this opportunity—”

“I have another meeting, Bradford. Eileen will provide you with what you need.”

“Yes...thank you.” She hurried out of the office, a little uncertain about exactly what had just happened. The office door closed behind her. She was momentarily irritated with his brusque manner, which had almost bordered on rude.

“Amazing, isn’t he?”

A female voice cut into Paige’s thoughts. She turned toward the sound, then glanced at the closed office door once more before giving her full attention to the woman approaching her. “I have to admit that was the oddest interview I’ve ever had...and certainly the shortest.”

The woman extended her hand and a warm smile. “We haven’t met officially. I’m Eileen Draper, the office manager.”

Eileen handed Paige a sheet of paper containing the information about the location of the company jet. It also contained all pertinent names, addresses, phone numbers and fax numbers of key personnel. Paige noted in amazement that her name had already been added to the list.

“You’ll be staying at the corporate flat in London. The address and phone number are listed.” Eileen glanced toward Bryce’s closed office door, then lowered her voice. “In case you haven’t guessed, he’s a true workaholic in every sense of the word, but he doesn’t expect any more from others than he’s willing to give himself. Right now he’s in the middle of several very big deals, so things are more hectic than usual. Just keep calm and try not to let him muddle your head with too many things at once. And most importantly, don’t be afraid to stand up to him if he starts driving you crazy. Underneath he’s really a very caring and considerate man, straightforward and honest.”

Eileen offered Paige a confident smile. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

Paige headed for the elevator, her thoughts not as positive as Eileen’s words had been. Straightforward and honest...hmmph! That’ll be the day. She took the elevator to the first floor and exited the building. She paused on the sidewalk and glanced up toward the third-floor window of Bryce’s office. Pretty soon everyone will know the real truth about you, Bryce Lexington, and your underhanded business tactics. She continued toward her car.

Bryce watched from his office window as Paige walked down the sidewalk. As soon as she was out of sight he picked up the phone and called Joe Thompkins. A minute later his security chief arrived in his office. Bryce settled into his chair, leaned back and propped his feet up on his desk. He listened intently as the forty-two-year-old ruggedly handsome man opened a file folder and gave him a quick rundown.

“Paige Bradford, maiden name Franklin. Thirty-two years old. Daughter of Stanley Franklin, founder of Franklin Industries. Mother deceased. Following a divorce one year ago from Jerry Bradford, Paige moved from St. Louis back to her father’s house in Los Angeles. She’s the one who discovered his body after he shot himself. That was six months ago. It was shortly after that when she began tracking down information about you.”

Bryce took the folder from Joe and looked over the contents as he slowly shook his head. “If she hadn’t tried to pass herself off as a writer doing an in-depth biography of me, then called one of my business associates, Herb Fenwick, to set up an interview with him we probably wouldn’t have known about her activities. Fortunately, Herb called me after she’d contacted him.”

Bryce scanned the folder again. “I’m not sure what type of person I was expecting, but she certainly wasn’t it. I wonder what she wants with me. It can’t have anything to do with my purchase of Franklin Industries. Surely she knows about her father, what he did and why the deal went down that way.”

“The real kicker was her procuring a job right here in corporate headquarters with access to your entire computer network. You have a copy of her personnel record, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Bryce reached in a desk drawer and withdrew another file folder. He looked through the pages, his gaze lingering for a moment longer than necessary on the photograph that did not do her justice. It did not show her beautiful smile or her sparkling hazel eyes. He let out a sigh of

exasperation. “I suppose the sensible thing to do would have been to just ask her what she was up to. There could be a perfectly logical reason for her running around prying into my life and business.”

“Oh, really?” Joe’s expression and tone of voice said he found Bryce’s suggestion totally ludicrous. “And just what do you suppose that perfectly logical reason might be?”

Bryce shot him an exasperated look. “All right, let’s say she does have some sort of ulterior motive for her actions. We don’t want to make any accusations without some type of proof.” Bryce suddenly sat up straighter, his tone of voice taking on a sense of urgency. “She hasn’t done anything detrimental to the company, like compromising sensitive corporate information, has she?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Her investigations seem to have been limited to publicly available information...so far.”

Bryce studied her file a moment longer, then closed it with a finality that said the discussion was finished. “I’ve transferred her to my personal staff as my administrative assistant effective today. According to her file she’s fully qualified for the job. That way I can keep my eye on her until we figure out what she’s up to—if she’s up to anything at all—and she won’t know we’re suspicious of her. I don’t want to tip our hand and frighten her off before we find out what this is about.”

“I don’t like it, Bryce. She seems to have some sort of personal agenda she’s pursuing and you can bet it’s not to your benefit.”

Bryce opened the file and stared at her photograph again. “You know—” he flashed a grin “—it’s worth a little bit of inconvenience to have someone around who looks like this. Eileen Draper is a dear and I couldn’t get along without her management skills, but she is old enough to be my mother.” He stole a guilty look toward the office door, then turned a sheepish expression to Joe. “And don’t you dare tell Eileen I said that.”

Bryce closed the folder and tossed it onto the corner of his desk, his manner once again turning to serious business. “I’ll play it by ear, take it one day at a time. We’ll see where things progress from here.”

“You want her working directly with you where she would be free to pursue whatever she has on her agenda up to and including doing you physical harm?”

“In all fairness, Joe, we don’t know that she has anything in mind that’s damaging to me or to the corporation.”

“That’s your final decision in the matter?”

“Yep. That’s the way I intend to play it.”

“I want to go on record as being dead set against this, Bryce.”

“Your objection is duly noted.”

Joe returned to his duties, leaving Bryce at his desk. Bryce’s thoughts returned to his brief encounter with Paige. He was pleased that she did not seem afraid of him. He knew his position and manner were often intimidating to others, but he was a busy man and didn’t have the time or desire to deal with unnecessary pleasantness. More than once he’d been told his handling of the social graces was occasionally less than adequate. He knew how to play the game when he needed to, but he felt that all the pretenses were a waste of time and definitely not his style.

He thoroughly disliked the little mind games of one-upmanship and psychological power control, both in business and in his personal life. He didn’t understand why people couldn’t be honest with each other. It would certainly save a lot of time and make life much easier.

A stab of guilt provided him with a sharp reminder of the blatant dishonesty and subterfuge he had perpetrated not half an hour ago in his office. He was not pleased about it, but the circumstances were unique. The necessity created by the situation overruled his displeasure and eased his pangs of conscience.

Bryce found all the little dating games and rituals a waste of time, too. He suspected it was one of the reasons it was so difficult for him to develop a personal and lasting relationship with a

woman. An errant thought crept into his reality as he wondered if he would ever be able to find the right woman.

It was not as if he was asking for the moon. All he wanted was an intelligent woman with a sense of humor who also possessed a healthy dose of solid common sense and was able to stand on her own two feet. Someone who was gentle and compassionate, but could be tough when the situation called for it. Someone well-read, with an appreciation of the arts, who also liked outdoor activities. Someone honest and forthright whom he could trust and with whom he could share. Someone he could give his heart and his love to.

No, he wasn't asking for the moon—just the entire solar system and all the stars beyond. He knew his requirements were impossibly high. With each passing year he came closer to the sad realization that his chances of finding someone he could love without reservation were growing more and more remote. Eileen had told him on more than one occasion that he worked too hard and had closed off his life to everything but his business interests. Bryce didn't want to believe her, but he knew deep down inside that she might be right. What he did not know was what he could do about it.

Was this the one thing that the man who had been dubbed the master of the golden touch would find too elusive? His business holdings, no matter how lucrative, could not keep him warm at night. They could not help him celebrate his successes or grapple with sorrow at sad occasions. They could not share his dreams. They were only material possessions, nothing more.

Bryce tried to sort out his impressions of Paige Bradford—she had definitely made an indelible impression on him. She wore her auburn hair swept up on her head. Her hazel eyes sparkled with intelligence and confidence. He recalled the way her hand felt in his, the subtle fragrance of her perfume, the tailored lines of her clothes and the way they fit her body. He frowned as another image presented itself—the way she stared at him, as if trying to get inside his head and read what was going on there.

He rose from his chair and headed toward the office door. A twinge of uncertainty pricked at his consciousness. Maybe Joe had been right. Perhaps hiring Paige Bradford had been a really bad idea.

Paige stared at the clothes hanging in her closet as the time grew closer and closer to the moment of departure. She didn't have a clue about what to pack for five days in London, or what type of situations she would be encountering. She didn't want to look foolish by overpacking, but didn't want to be caught unprepared either.

She shook her head as she frowned. Even though she thought she'd studied Bryce Lexington so thoroughly that she knew him inside out, she had been totally unprepared for the man who had greeted her when she walked into his office. The photographs she had seen of him depicted a handsome man, but she could now say with complete confidence that the camera did not do him justice. His dark hair was thick and tended toward the longish side. He had a deep golden tan. And those eyes—they weren't blue, they were the most incredibly brilliant turquoise.

She had also been surprised by the way he was dressed. As the head of a corporate conglomerate with international holdings, she had just assumed Bryce would wear a suit to the office, especially to conduct a job interview. Instead, he wore jeans, a pullover shirt and running shoes. The shirt accentuated his broad shoulders and strong arms without the effect seeming to have been his intention.

And it was not just his physical appearance that had captured her undivided attention, either. His commanding presence had filled the large office. It was an intoxicating combination of power, wealth and confidence, yet did not present itself in the form of an inflated ego or arrogance in spite of his somewhat brusque manner. At least not yet, she cynically reminded herself. She knew a man like Bryce Lexington would soon show his true colors, and when he did she would be there to capitalize on it.

Paige dismissed any further speculation. She finally packed one suitcase, her decisions dictated more by the necessities of the tight time frame he had given her rather than practical considerations.

She barely had time after packing to stop at the post office to make arrangements to have her mail held. She didn't dare be late meeting her new boss at the airport. She knew a man like Bryce Lexington would not tolerate being kept waiting. It would not be a good start to their relationship and would hinder the next phase of her quest, searching for the information she needed to exact her revenge and expose him to the world.

Paige snorted in disgust. The word relationship usually pertained to something positive, to something good. But not in this case, not when the relationship in question was between herself and Bryce Lexington. She mentally steeled herself against the difficulties she would need to endure along the path she had chosen. She turned the corner and pulled her car into the parking lot at the company hangar.

Bryce was waiting for her and hurried her onto the private jet. Precisely on schedule, as was everything that surrounded Bryce Lexington, they lifted off into the evening sky. To her surprise, as soon as they were airborne he went to the small galley, opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. She had assumed he would have hired someone to handle these chores.

"Here, Bradford." He set the glasses on opposite sides of a table. "We'll have something to eat then get right to work."

"We'll be working during the flight?" She heard a hint of irritation in her voice, but hadn't been able to stop it. That possibility had not occurred to her. It had already been a long, full day.

He cocked his head and stared at her. "Do you have a problem with that?"

She quickly regained her composure. "No...of course not. This just seems like an odd place to try to get some work done, not really a business setting." She tried to offer a smile that said she was not upset by his long workday, but she wasn't sure how successful she had been.

"I do very little work at the Santa Monica corporate offices. I doubt I'm there more than two or three days a month. I prefer to work in more comfortable surroundings. I maintain a full office at my home, where I usually work when I'm in town."

Bryce toyed with his wineglass, running his fingertip around the rim, then turning the stem between his fingers. It was not so much a nervous habit as an effort to focus his attention on the business aspects of what was happening and away from his very personal thoughts about the attractive woman sitting across from him.

His nostrils flared slightly as he inhaled the same tantalizing fragrance that she'd worn at the interview. He seldom made mistakes, but this time he had made a big one. He definitely should have listened to Joe and not brought her into his office, but not for the reasons Joe had presented. Bryce's reasons were far more personal and definitely involved his libido. He took another sip of wine. "I can't think of any reason to waste all the time it takes to fly to London when we could be accomplishing something worthwhile."

Accomplishing something worthwhile. Paige turned his words over in her mind. Was his definition of worthwhile based on how much money it made him? "What do you believe makes an accomplishment worthwhile? Is it based on ethical considerations or monetary results? What criteria do you use for judging it?"

He leveled a serious gaze at her. "That sounds like a loaded question. Why don't you tell me what's really on your mind?"

An uncomfortable shiver moved through Paige's body. Bryce seemed to be reading her mind. She should never have said anything about ethics. The words had just sort of slipped out before she could stop them. She took a deep breath and slowly expelled it before responding, but it didn't stop the nervous tingle.

"I didn't have anything particular on my mind," she said. "I guess I must have worded my question badly. I was only wondering if you were talking about your business activities or your charitable concerns."

“Why do you think there would be any difference in the way the two areas are handled?” he asked. “Ethics apply to both circumstances, and monetary results are simply a way of measuring business success, but it’s not the be-all and end-all of everything. I like to think that I treat all situations with the same consideration, the same rules applying regardless of the type of project.”

“I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to imply that—”

“Forget it, Bradford.” He clipped his words. “No harm done.” Bryce rose from his chair and took two dinner trays from the refrigerator and put them into the microwave.

When Paige had gotten up this morning from a good night’s sleep, she’d had no idea that she would be on her way to London in a private jet before the day was through with the very man who had been the focus of all her energy for the past six months—the man she had sworn would pay for what he had done to her father.

She sipped her wine while she watched Bryce locate the silverware and napkins and some place mats for the table. He seemed to be pure nonstop energy. Paige couldn’t imagine how many things must be going around inside his mind at one time. She considered that maybe she could just ask him about what happened between him and her father, but immediately dismissed it as being a totally unacceptable idea. There was no way that she trusted him to be honest with her in spite of his little speech about handling all things in an ethical manner. Maybe that speech fooled some people, but not her.

She knew if she even alluded to who she was, it would put him on his guard, then she would never be able to dig out the truth. He might even end up destroying some of the evidence she needed. She had maneuvered herself into an excellent position to find out what had really happened. It was better to simply continue with the plan that was already in place.

The image of her father slumped over his desk with the gun still in his hand had been burned into her memory. He had left a hand-written note that said:

I’m sorry, Paige. There was no other way. Please forgive my weakness.

She had found a partially destroyed file folder smoldering in the fireplace. What remained of the file made no more sense to her than her father’s suicide note, but she had saved it anyway. She was shocked to find that her father’s company was in such deep financial trouble. That he had long ago cashed in his life insurance. That even his house was mortgaged to the hilt. She sold the house and what little money that remained was barely enough to pay for his funeral.

Everything would have been all right if Bryce Lexington hadn’t suddenly cut off negotiations with her father for the purchase of Franklin Industries. The worst part, and the thing that had aroused her suspicions, was that he managed to gain control of her father’s company anyway and at a fraction of the original price—literally pennies on the dollar. What would happen to the people who depended on Franklin Industries to support their families? Would he throw them out like yesterday’s newspaper? The fate of her father’s employees was a situation that bothered her a great deal. So far the company was still in operation, but for how long? Somehow she had to find a way to ensure that their jobs were protected, but she didn’t have a clue how...yet.

Since then Paige had made finding out everything about Bryce Lexington her number-one priority. He was thirty-eight years old and stood six-one. He possessed a genius IQ, graduating from high school at the age of fifteen. By the time he turned twenty-one he had earned a bachelor’s degree in history, a second bachelor’s degree in fine art and a master’s degree in business administration. Certainly an unusual combination of educational interests and pursuits. He spoke fluent French, German, Italian and Spanish. What she had not found was any record of him ever being married, something she thought very odd.

Bryce seemed to have fooled everyone into believing he was quite a remarkable man, but she knew better. One way or another she intended to get the proof she needed and prove his responsibility in her father’s suicide.

Paige slowly shook her head from side to side. In spite of all the information she had gathered about him, he was not what she had expected. She caught herself just in time. For a moment she had been about to admit that she was impressed, that there was a little bit of admiration on her part, but that would never do. She needed to keep herself focused on her true purpose. She had to find proof that his unethical business practices were responsible for ruining her father and do what she could to protect the jobs of his employees. She took another sip of wine as her gaze wandered back to Bryce.

The intensity of his eyes and the concentrated energy of his stare startled her. Her swallow of wine went down the wrong way, causing a choking cough.

He took the wineglass from her hand and set it on the table, a look of genuine concern crossing his face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes..." She pulled in a deep breath, then another. "I'm...I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes...thank you. I guess the wine just went down the wrong way." Why had he been staring at her like that? Had she done something wrong? Had her thoughts somehow managed to slip out as spoken words? Was he suspicious of her? If he was on to her real intentions, she would never be able to find the answers she needed.

The timer on the microwave signaled that the meals were ready. He took out the trays and placed them on the table. "Dinner is served."

"It smells good." Paige picked up her fork and took a bite of the baked chicken.

Bryce explained the details of his business to his new assistant while they ate, making a concentrated effort to keep his tone and manner impersonal and not stray to other topics. It took more diligence than he had originally anticipated. Paige had managed to capture his senses and captivate his desire quicker than any woman he had ever met. He desperately wanted to reach out and stroke her hair, touch her flawless skin...and taste her lips. It was an urge he fought off. It would never do, putting himself at risk that way when there was so much at stake.

Her comments about ethics and money continued to nag at his consciousness. It had been an odd exchange of words, almost as if she had been challenging him based on some hidden information. Could that have been part of her agenda, what she had been searching for? But for what purpose? He forced his mind back to the business at hand, choosing to save his speculation for later.

"We have four projects that require my personal attention in London. First we have a buyout of a small London publishing company. Next is the merger of my leather-goods factory with a string of small exclusive boutiques in London and Paris where my company will retain an overall fifty-one percent ownership. Then there's a contract for my public relations firm in New York to represent a British import-export company in the United States. The last project is a proposal to provide original works of art from new and promising artists in the States to one of the most prestigious art galleries in London."

As soon as they finished eating, Bryce handed her four file folders. Their hands touched for the briefest of moments, sending a seductive warmth through his body. He abruptly jumped to his feet, clipping his words as he spoke. "I have several things to dictate into my recorder, so while I'm doing that I want you to familiarize yourself with the contents of these files. They'll give you details about the four projects I mentioned."

With that, he turned and hurried to the back of the plane and disappeared into the back cabin. He had to get away from Paige, from the sensual reaction he had to her proximity. He leaned against the closed door and took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He was accustomed to being in charge of everything that went on around him. He did not like this lack of control that jittered around inside him—a feeling he knew was directly attributable to the sudden presence of Paige Bradford in his life. He took another deep breath, but it didn't help. It did nothing to calm his inner turmoil.

He picked up the small recorder and turned his thoughts to the speech he would be making at an upcoming charity event.



Paige stared at the closed cabin door where Bryce had disappeared from sight. He had certainly managed to skillfully sidestep her questions about ethical behavior. She felt a tightening in her throat and an unsettled stirring in the pit of her stomach. She did not know if it was a result of her irritation over his abrupt departure and rude manner or something far more personal.

All of his actions were abrupt. He was obviously a very busy man who simply did not have time for long-drawn-out explanations and conversations, but that did not excuse his curt manner. She allowed herself a huff of indignation. A little common courtesy was not asking too much, even of a busy man.

Her jaw involuntarily clenched for a moment as she tried to banish the strange feelings that had been churning inside her for the past hour. She seemed to be caught between what she knew about the Bryce Lexington who hid behind that too-good-to-be-true image he projected to the public and the reality of the dynamic man who had invaded her life like an unstoppable force of nature.

She took a calming breath. It did not help. She took another deep breath, held it for several seconds, then slowly exhaled. Paige picked up a file folder and tried to concentrate on the documents. She read the first page, then realized she hadn't a clue as to what she had just read. Instead of seeing the words on the page, she saw a vivid likeness of Bryce Lexington. He had managed to have a disruptive effect on her without even being in the same room.

There were several things she did not know about Bryce Lexington the man rather than Bryce Lexington the corporate giant, things she wanted to know—things she needed to know. And none of them had anything to do with her father, her need to protect the jobs of her father's employees or her chosen mission to expose the unethical side of Bryce Lexington's business practices.

She tried to get rid of those errant bits of curiosity. She already knew quite a bit about him, but she still lacked the proof of his culpability in her father's death. If she could find that proof she could use it to force him to do something honorable, to secure the jobs of her father's employees rather than tossing them out on the street.

She certainly couldn't trust Bryce to do it on his own. She had learned all about trust from her ex-husband...trusting anyone was something that no longer came easily for her. Once trust had been destroyed, rebuilding it was a long process. And it was a process that she hadn't really started to investigate, one that had not been necessary. She had no need to place that type of trust in anyone else. She could take care of herself.

She breathed a little bit easier as she regained control of her wandering emotions. It had only been a fleeting lapse of judgment and she would not allow it to happen again. She had initially been thrown off balance by the overwhelming magnitude of his dynamic presence, the way he had dominated the large office where they met. After all, she was only human, and even though he was the enemy, that did not negate that he was an undeniably sexy and desirable man.

But Paige had it under control now. No doubt about it. From this moment on their relationship would be business only. No more errant thoughts or idle musings for her. Bryce had given her a great deal of material to look over and she was not about to give him any reason to be dissatisfied with her work. This job was the perfect place for her to carry out her plan and she was determined to go through with it. One way or the other, she would make Bryce Lexington pay for what he'd done.

She stared at the file folders he had given her to study. Then the idea popped into her head. At first it was only an inkling, then it exploded into a full-blown plan. One of these files could give her solid proof of his wrongdoing. Four different projects—surely at least one of them would disclose some underhanded dealings on his part? It would give her written evidence of his ethics and what wasn't in the files would be something she could observe firsthand since she would be present at the meetings. It would be a big step in proving Bryce's duplicity.

Her excitement grew as she picked up the folder and began to search the contents for the proof she needed.

## Two

Bryce stayed in the rear cabin and continued his dictation—reports, letters, memos. He finished the last letter then clicked off the recorder as he glanced at his watch. It was almost midnight Los Angeles time. He left the cabin and walked through the plane, coming to a halt next to the table. Paige's head rested on top of the opened file, her eyes closed. Her slow, even breathing told him she was asleep. He stared at her for a moment. The hard edge he had put on his feelings softened as he continued to gaze at her. She was truly lovely. If only he could figure out what was on her hidden agenda.

He carefully picked her up and carried her to the back cabin. She stirred, but only snuggled farther into his arms without waking. It was a small thing, but the intimate gesture touched off a rush of excitement deep inside him. He held her in his arms a moment longer than necessary before gently placing her on the bed. He removed her shoes, then pulled a blanket over her and left the cabin.

Bryce poured himself a glass of wine, then sat at the table, his forehead creased in deep concentration as his thoughts turned to the situation at hand. He pictured the beautiful woman who had snuggled so enticingly in his arms and thought back to her comments about ethical behavior and monetary results. I don't know what you're up to, Paige Franklin Bradford, but I think finding out is going to be a very interesting adventure.

An image of Paige appeared in his mind's eye. An uncomfortable shiver made its way up his spine. He wanted to rid himself of the image and everything implied that went with it. He wanted to, but he didn't seem to be able to force himself to do it. The delightful image played over and over in his mind.

He knew he needed to be very careful in how he proceeded. If she did, indeed, have some sort of hidden agenda as Joe had suggested, then any misstep on his part would only provide her with more fuel. Bryce had to make sure everything was totally proper and aboveboard—a thought that led him back to his curiosity over her comment about business ethics.

He leaned back in the recliner, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He needed to get some sleep. A few minutes later his conscious thoughts were replaced by the subconscious workings of his mind.

The private jet streaked its way eastward through the night sky, eventually traveling into daylight.

Paige woke with a start as the morning sun shone through the window and landed on her face. She sat up abruptly and looked around, trying to get her bearings. She knew she was still on the jet, but did not recall leaving the main cabin. Nor did she remember exactly when she fell asleep, other than the fact that it was somewhere during file number three. Her suitcase sat on the floor by the bed and her shoes were next to it. She took a quick shower. As soon as she finished dressing she went to the main cabin.

She found Bryce stretched out in one of the recliners, his fingers laced together and his hands resting casually across his stomach. He was asleep. He seemed totally and completely at ease. Absolutely no tension showed on his face. She watched him for a moment. She scowled as a twinge of disgust jabbed at her. It was evident that he did not allow his ruthless business tactics to disturb his peace of mind.

As Paige continued to watch him, he began to stir. Suddenly he bolted upright in the chair, instantly wide awake.

"Bradford!" He stared at her for a long moment wondering what had been going through her mind to cause the strange expression on her face. He immediately assumed command of the situation. "Well—" he rose from the chair and stretched his arms above his head "—I see you're finally awake.

Maybe now you'll have time to finish going over those files. You seem to have fallen asleep in the middle of number three." With that, he turned and went to the galley to fix some coffee.

"Finally awake?" Her hackles stood on end as she glared at him. She could not prevent the animosity from creeping into her voice. "Just what do you mean by that? You can't expect people to work twenty-four hours a day."

Either he didn't hear her or was purposely ignoring her questions. Either way, perhaps it was just as well. She needed to watch her step. She knew she was in a position to be able to uncover the type of information she needed. She didn't want to do anything to cause him to fire her from this job. Yes, caution was definitely in order regardless of his having just exhibited yet another example of his abrupt behavior.

She backed off for a moment as she watched him. She silently acknowledged that he was fixing the coffee himself rather than expecting her to do it. She tightened her jaw again. That was the only thing she would admit. She retrieved files three and four from the table then sat down on the couch to continue where she had left off before falling asleep.

"Here, Bradford." Bryce set a cup of coffee next to her. "Hurry up and finish with those files. We're landing in an hour." With that, he took his coffee and went into the back cabin.

Paige continued reading the files, closing file number four half an hour later just as he opened the door and came back into the main cabin clean shaven and wearing fresh clothes. She did not entirely understand all the ramifications of his proposal for profits and how they would be allocated, but the amount of notes, including his hand-written notations, indicated to her that the London art gallery was his pet project. She recalled Bryce's degree in fine art, which would account for his interest.

"Any questions, Bradford?"

"None that I can think of right now."

He flashed a quick smile that said he knew better. "There will be." He dismissed the subject as he reached for the coffeepot to refill his cup. He held up the pot in her direction, cocked his head and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Bradford?"

She held up her cup. "Yes, thank you."

It annoyed her, the way he looked as rested as if he had just had eight hours' sleep in a comfortable bed rather than a few hours in a chair. She entertained a brief question as to why he had allowed her to have the bed. She did not remember walking, so he must have carried her into the cabin. It had been a very considerate gesture on his part. She quickly reined in her thoughts. It would take more than one moment of consideration to alter her opinion of him and what he represented.

She wondered what other unexpected thoughts would force themselves upon her as a result of her in-person association with this man—this dynamic and impressive man. In the secret recesses of her mind she began to wonder if she had gotten in way over her head.

"Buckle your seat belt, Bradford. We're approaching the airport."

The jet touched down for a perfect landing. Bryce gathered the files Paige had been reading plus the papers he had been working on and shoved them into a briefcase, then thrust it into her hands.

"You take this, Bradford. I'll get the suitcases."

They exited the plane, cleared customs, then went immediately to the taxi that whisked them into London. Forty-five minutes later he unlocked the front door of an attractive flat in the fashionable Knightsbridge section. After depositing the suitcases on the living-room floor he launched into a quick tour. It was a much larger place than it appeared from the outside.

There were three bedrooms, a large living room, a dining room, kitchen and two bathrooms. "The front bedroom is the largest and is used as an office." He indicated the door, then headed down the hall.

She stuck her head through the opened door to give a quick look, then hurried to catch up with Bryce who was already at the next room.

“This is my bedroom, and that—” he pointed to the next room down the hall “—is the guest bedroom.”

Paige really had not formulated any definite thoughts about sleeping arrangements. Even though Eileen said she would be staying at the corporate flat, it had not occurred to her that they would be sleeping this close to each other. She felt the scowl spread across her face, but was unable to stop it before it caught his attention.

“You look angry. Is there a problem of some sort?”

Paige swallowed the words she wanted to say, instead making an inadequate attempt at covering up. “Uh...no, of course not.” She was in a precarious situation. She didn’t trust him, but it was not an uneasiness over her physical safety. What she didn’t trust was the concerned good guy persona he tried to project. But she didn’t dare let on...not if she wanted to stay on his good side so she could find the proof she needed.

Bryce’s brisk manner gave no indication of his thoughts. “If there’s no problem, then let’s get to work. As soon as you unpack, I want you to transcribe all the material I dictated on the plane. I’ve left the tape next to the computer. I’m sure you’ll find everything you need in the office.” He disappeared inside his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Paige picked up her suitcase and took it into the guest room as she considered what had just happened. It had been a bad slip to let Bryce see her displeasure. She could not afford for her inner feelings and ulterior motives to seep through. She had to continue to appear as simply another one of his employees. She couldn’t risk antagonizing him, at least not until she had what she wanted.

The problem was...well...he had her confused. She knew exactly who and what he was, but he refused to fit into the mold she had created for him in her mind. Yes, indeed—Bryce Lexington had her very confused. And not the least of it was her undeniable attraction to him, an attraction she needed to squash before it caused her real problems. She toyed with the notion that some of her antagonism toward him just might be a defensive mechanism directly related to that attraction.

After unpacking, she went down the hall to the office where she found the tape next to the computer. She listened to the first three letters without transcribing anything, then stopped the tape. He was truly amazing. He dictated as if he were actually reading something—no pauses to think, no changing his mind. She rewound the tape and started from the beginning.

She had barely finished the letters when the phone rang. When it rang a second time without Bryce making an appearance from his bedroom, she quickly grabbed it before it could ring a third time.

“Hello...yes, and who...uh, please hold a moment.”

She knocked softly at his bedroom door, her senses still numbed by the identity of the caller—the French ambassador himself, in person rather than his secretary. When she received no response to her knock, she called out to him. “Mr. Lexington...uh, Bryce?”

His voice came from behind the closed door. “Don’t stand out in the hall, Bradford. Come on in.”

She cautiously opened his bedroom door, not at all sure what she would find. He was turning out to be one surprise after another. Bryce sat on an exercise cycle, pedaling away while reading a book.

“A phone call for you. It’s the French ambassador.”

He wore only a pair of jogging shorts. His entire body, from his broad shoulders down to the bottom of his long legs, was taut and muscular without being muscle-bound and every bit of exposed skin was as tanned as his face. He obviously spent a great deal of time in the sun.

Paige experienced the same jolt of sensual desire as when they’d first met. Not only was he the most incredibly handsome man she had ever seen, he was an ideal specimen of the perfect male physique. A wave of heated desire swept through her body making it feel as if the temperature in the room had jumped at least twenty degrees. She quickly brought her gaze back to Bryce’s face for fear that she might be tempted to mentally remove his jogging shorts.

His expression brightened at the mention of the phone call. He put down his book, then climbed off the exercise cycle. He grabbed a towel and wiped the glistening sheen of perspiration from his face and neck. Without a word to Paige, he picked up the phone extension in his bedroom. A dazzling smile spread across his face. “Andre, mon ami.” His entire conversation was in French.

Paige spoke some French, enough to get by, but certainly nothing compared to what she heard coming from Bryce. He spoke rapidly, too rapidly for her to catch all of what he was saying. There was something about having just arrived a few hours ago and an agreement to be somewhere the following evening, then he hung up.

“I hope you brought something formal, Bradford. We’re going to a reception at the French embassy tomorrow night.”

She stared at him, her eyes wide in amazement. “We’re what?”

“You’ve got to learn to pay closer attention.”

“I heard what you said, I just don’t believe what I’m hearing. It never occurred to me to pack anything that formal.” She made no attempt to hide her irritation, but did try to curb her anger. “You didn’t mention anything about me needing something for this kind of event. In fact, you gave no hint of any kind as to what I—”

“You’re right. My fault.”

“You barely gave me time to pack—” She stopped in midsentence as the full realization of what he said finally hit her. “What?”

He spoke quietly, his words surrounded by a soft sincerity. “I said you were right. It was my fault. I should have been more specific with my instructions.”

Had she heard him correctly? He had readily accepted blame and was that a conciliatory note of apology in his voice? That was most certainly out of character for him, or at least her preconceived notion of who and what he was. What type of underhanded maneuver was he trying to perpetrate? That was the second time he had done something completely out of character. Paige had him neatly categorized and did not like it when he did something contrary to that mold. Well, he still didn’t fool her. Two isolated incidents were hardly enough to change her opinion. Bryce was a ruthless business shark who could not be trusted.

“We’ll go shopping first thing in the morning to get you something appropriate. Now—” he changed topics without warning, indicating that the discussion about clothes was finished “—how are you coming with my dictation?”

She marveled at the speed with which he moved from one topic to another. Before she could get an answer out, she saw the look in his eyes shift from the current situation to something far removed. He slung the towel around his neck, grabbing the ends where they hung across his chest. He creased his forehead in concentration for a moment as he stared at her, or more accurately, he seemed to be staring through her to some unknown spot.

“Tell me, Bradford, do you know how to snow ski?”

“Dictation? Snow ski? Which question do you want answered first?” She tried to put some sense to the way his mind jumped from one thing to another, but it was quickly becoming a formidable task.

“Both of them.” He said it as a simple statement of fact, as if he thought it should have been obvious.

She took a calming breath in an effort to combat her rising frustration with what appeared to her to be the disjointed way he jumped from one thing to another without warning. “All the letters and memos have been transcribed and are in the computer. I haven’t done the reports or speech yet. Yes, I know how to snow ski.”

He offered her a dazzling smile, as if the previous few minutes of tension and the earlier cross words had never happened. “Good. I have business in Aspen at the end of next week. There’s still some good spring skiing conditions.”

He absently tugged on the ends of the towel, first one end then the other, causing it to slide back and forth across his nape as he stared at the floor deep in concentration. Suddenly he yanked off the towel and tossed it into a basket in the corner. "Transcribe everything except the speech. Hold off on that until tomorrow. I want to give it some more thought. I'm going to take a shower, then we'll get something to eat."

As abruptly as it had all started, their conversation was finished. He went to the bathroom across the hall and closed the door. A few moments later she heard the shower running. Paige could not stop the slight smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. In spite of his abrupt manner, she had to admit that he was the most fascinating and baffling man she had ever come across. She closed her eyes and pictured his tanned body under the spray of the shower. A jolt of desire swept through her.

What was even more amazing was that he did not seem to have any pretensions about who he was, right down to not seeming to realize just how attractive he was. He sported the trappings of a very busy man and Eileen had warned her about him being a workaholic, but he did not exhibit any ego problems.

What had she gotten herself into? A formal reception the next evening at the French embassy in London and then skiing in Aspen the following week and all as part of her job. Most people would kill to have a job like that, but for her it was only a temporary situation. A means to an end. A little twinge jabbed at her consciousness. She could not clearly identify it. Perhaps it was regret, maybe even guilt. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. She did not want any errant emotions dissuading her from the course she had set.

She finished the reports, then listened to the first part of the speech. She turned off the cassette player and leaned back in her chair. The speech, like the letters and memos, was dictated straight through without pauses. It was an excellent speech, articulate and entertaining while still making the necessary points. She couldn't imagine what there was that he would want to change.

"I've thought about it and won't be making any changes to the speech. You can transcribe it after we get something to eat. Then we'll call it a day."

The sound of his voice startled her, causing her to whirl in her swivel chair. He stood framed in the office doorway wearing only a towel wrapped around his hips. Droplets of water still clung to his tanned skin. His hair had been quickly towel dried and hung in tousled disarray. His turquoise eyes sparkled with life and vitality.

He continued to speak as if he had not noticed her reaction to his sudden appearance. "I imagine you'll be wanting to get a good night's sleep to catch up on the jet lag. Tomorrow is going to be a very busy day, then there's the reception in the evening."

The heat rose on the back of her neck as her heart beat just a little faster and her breathing increased. He looked absolutely gorgeous in a wildly abandoned and totally uninhibited way. Paige tried to cover the flush of excitement that darted through her body. She swallowed the lump that had lodged in her throat and quickly averted her eyes.

Her words were terse as she turned away from him and went through the motions of shutting down the computer. She knew the quaver in her voice would probably betray her even though she tried to sound in control. "I would appreciate it if you would present yourself properly dressed. Even though this is your residence, it's still a place of business."

In spite of her words she truly believed he was unaware of his state of dress...or more accurately, his state of undress. What she had observed of him so far told her that when Bryce had something on his mind, he acted on it immediately while the thought was still fresh. Even though he had a total grasp on what was happening around him, he seemed to pay no more attention to himself than he did to the wallpaper in the hallway or the air he breathed.

Bryce glanced at the clock on the desk. "We'll leave here in half an hour. There's a little Italian place only a couple of blocks away. We can walk." He turned and went to his bedroom as if her comments about his lack of clothes had not penetrated his consciousness.

Paige leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, expelled a quick breath and composed her trembling insides. She began to wonder if accepting this job had been a bad idea, not the stroke of luck she had originally thought it to be.

A quick shot of panic raced through her. She needed to escape the mesmerizing aura of Bryce Lexington and the excitement that darted around inside her whenever she looked at him. She shook her head in resignation. As soon as they got back to Los Angeles she would resign from the job. There had to be some other way of digging out the truth about how he ruined her father without being in such proximity to this very disconcerting man.

And whatever it was she had to find it.

She took a steadying breath. She desperately needed to get control of herself. She knew she could not get on with her life until she was able to put to rest the painful chapter concerning her father's suicide. She had to find closure for that traumatic episode and that meant eventually confronting Bryce Lexington. She took another calming breath, turned her attention to putting things away in the office, then went to her room.

It had been an exceptionally long day. Pangs of hunger battled with her yawns for control of her body. Dinner followed by some much-needed sleep were the only two items on her agenda for that night. Perhaps things would be a little clearer in the morning.

And maybe Bryce Lexington would not turn her reality inside out every time he looked at her. A little sigh of despair presented itself. Sure...and maybe some unknown benefactor would drop a million dollars in her lap, too.

She freshened her makeup and changed clothes, selecting a pair of black slacks with a red and white silk blouse and red shoes. The slacks had a matching jacket. An uneasy nervousness churned in the pit of her stomach. Even though she didn't feel any concern for her physical safety, she didn't trust Bryce Lexington any more than she trusted any other man. Trust had to be earned, not freely given.

While waiting for him, Paige took the opportunity to look around the flat a little more thoroughly. She wandered into the kitchen, opening the cupboard and looking into the refrigerator. There was some food, staples only, but not anything that would allow them to have dinner there.

"There'll be some food here tomorrow morning."

Again, the sound of that smooth masculine voice sent little tingles up her spine at the same time that it startled her to attention. Why did he persist in sneaking up behind her like that? No, that was an unfair statement. Her mind had been absorbed in her own thoughts and she simply hadn't heard him enter the kitchen.

He looked devastatingly gorgeous. He wore a turquoise-blue shirt open at the neck almost the exact color of his eyes and charcoal-gray slacks. Her heartbeat increased ever so slightly. She fumbled for some words, anything that would relieve the tension rapidly building inside her. "Who takes care of this place when you're not here, or do other people also use it?"

"Well, finally a question." He flashed her a dazzling smile. "I was beginning to wonder if you had any curiosity at all." He glanced at his watch. "Let's go, Bradford. I'll answer any questions you have while we walk."

He had done it to her again, abruptly changed everything without warning. Why did he persist in doing that? An abstract thought crept into her mind, though she was not sure exactly where it had originated. Was this his way of testing people? Of determining if someone had what it took to be part of his fast-paced world? If so, it was certainly an interesting method.

Paige gathered her determination. She would show him that she was up to anything he chose to throw her way. She grabbed her jacket, then they stepped outside into the cool night air. He set a brisk pace, but not too fast, as they walked down the tree-lined street.

Bryce willingly filled her in on how the London flat, as well as all the corporate properties, were maintained. "I have a real estate management firm who makes sure the place is cleaned on a weekly basis. The flat is used by various company executives when they're in London on business as well as

by a few select clients. Everything is scheduled through Eileen so that there aren't any embarrassing mix-ups. She notifies the management firm and they stock the refrigerator. I was originally scheduled to arrive tomorrow rather than today, thus no food in the refrigerator yet."

As long as he seemed to be talkative, she ventured another question, one she hoped would lead her to some information about her father. "How many companies do you own? Your business interests, based on the four files you gave me to read, seem to be quite varied."

Bryce studied her thoughtfully. He wondered why she would be asking something she probably already knew. Well, he could play that game right along with her. If he encouraged her questions, she just might tip her hand as to what she was really looking for. Besides, he didn't have anything to hide.

"Ah, yes. My mini-empire." He laughed. "You'll find public relations and marketing information about all the companies in the computer. All you have to do is call it up and print it out."

"You seem to be...well...surprisingly open about your business interests, especially considering that I'm barely more than a stranger to you."

Bryce stopped walking. He searched the depths of her hazel eyes before speaking. "I like to think that people are basically honest and trustworthy, that they function in an honorable manner." He could not stop the tinge of disappointment that surrounded his soft words. "But sometimes things happen that prove me wrong." He shifted his gaze off toward the horizon, then started walking again. His thoughts had been about Stanley Franklin. He had not categorized Stanley Franklin's daughter... at least not yet.

"From what you've said it sounds like ethical behavior is important to you in your business dealings. Does that apply to everything?"

He came to a halt and leveled a serious gaze at her, taking a moment to turn her question over in his mind. It was the second time she had brought up the subject of ethics. Was it a window into her hidden agenda? Something to do with her reason for being there? If it was, he hadn't put it together with a motive yet.

Bryce finally answered her question. "I have a high regard for honesty in everything, not just business." He continued down the sidewalk toward the restaurant.

Paige suffered a quick stab of apprehension as they walked along in silence. Was his answer really a warning aimed specifically at her? Did Bryce suspect she had been lying to him, or was it just a matter of her own guilt bothering her? In spite of the deception she had orchestrated, she was not usually a dishonest person. She shuddered at the contradiction between her actions and her beliefs.

"So...you feel that all business transactions should be conducted with total honesty and in a highly ethical manner?"

"Don't you?"

"That's a very admirable sentiment, but don't you find that occasionally it's just not possible? That sometimes you need to bend the rules a bit in order to get what you want?"

"Rules have the occasional exception," he told her, "but I prefer to trust that most people are honest and ethical."

"Hypothetically speaking, what would you do if you found yourself involved in a deal and discovered your trust had been misplaced, that the person you were dealing with was unethical and unprincipled?"

Bryce stopped walking again, stared her square in the eyes and gave a straightforward reply. "I'd break off the negotiations." Without waiting for her response, he proceeded down the street.

Paige rushed to catch up with him. It was a conversation she was grateful to have ended, even though it was one she had started. There was something about his words that made her regret bringing up the topic of ethics and trust. Bryce Lexington was beginning to seem a little less like the villain she had painted him and more like someone she would like to know. And if the way he made her heart pound and the blood race through her veins was any indication, she wanted to know him intimately... very intimately.



She pursed her lips as she tried to get her thoughts back in order. She needed to reaffirm her dedication to her goal. The truth of what really happened between her father and Bryce rested somewhere with Bryce Lexington and she had to find it. Just because he said the right words didn't mean he really lived his life that way.

She clenched her jaw. She didn't believe those words, either. She couldn't trust what he said without some kind of proof. She couldn't trust him. No one who had achieved his level of success did it by always being honest and forthright regardless of his attempt to convince her it was true. She would find the proof she needed and would force him to take care of her father's employees. She would find that chink in his armor no matter what it took to do it.

## Three

Bryce and Paige entered a modest building on a quiet side street. It was a charming little Italian restaurant off the beaten path. The aroma of good food floated on the air. Music played softly in the background, just loud enough to be discernible above the buzz of happy and cheerful voices. This was a neighborhood establishment, not one for the tourists.

“Ah...Bryce, my friend!” A short, dark-haired man in his late fifties rushed to them as soon as they came through the door, his thickly accented words leaving no question about his Italian origin.

“It’s good to see you again, Antonio. How are you feeling?”

Antonio projected a feigned air of annoyance. “You begin to sound like my wife and children, always asking me how I feel. I feel fine.” His voice teased and his dark eyes sparkled as he tapped his hand against his chest. “I am good as a young man of twenty.”

Bryce looked around the crowded restaurant, then spoke to Antonio in Italian. Antonio answered him, then signaled a busboy. Paige watched in amazement as a table and two chairs appeared from nowhere and were set up in a quiet corner that just moments before had contained a large potted plant.

She paid close attention to everything. Bryce became more and more puzzling with each new encounter. He seemed to function comfortably on all levels of society—a phone call directly from the French ambassador with a personal invitation to a formal reception and a small neighborhood restaurant owner who called him by his first name while acknowledging their friendship.

Antonio’s voice cut into her thoughts. “This way, Bryce—” he stepped aside, waving them in the direction of the table as he smiled at Paige “—and your lovely lady.”

No sooner were they seated than a bottle of wine appeared at the table along with menus. Bryce poured them each a glass of wine, then opened the menu. “What’s your pleasure, Bradford?”

She looked at the numerous selections. “You seem to know this place very well. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Everything is good. All the pasta is made daily right here in the kitchen and all the vegetables are fresh. Antonio’s wife is the cook, his daughter helps with the cooking and fills in as cashier when Antonio isn’t here and his sons are the waiters. The entire operation is family run.”

A handsome young man of about twenty-two appeared at their table. “Good to see you again, Bryce.” He shot a quick look of approval in Paige’s direction.

“How are you, Rudy? How’s business been?”

The young man laughed, an open and easy laugh. “You should know the answer to that better than I do.”

Rudy’s words weren’t lost on Paige, but she did not understand what they meant.

Bryce quickly scanned the room, then he lowered his voice. “Antonio’s been sticking to his reduced work schedule, hasn’t he?”

“You know Pop. It’s tough to keep him out of here. He’s been doing pretty good, though. The doctor says things are just fine.” Rudy shot another quick glance in Paige’s direction, then leaned over to whisper to Bryce. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you with such a foxy lady...someone special, huh?”

He may have been whispering, but it was loud enough for Paige to make out what he had said. She quickly turned away so her embarrassment wouldn’t be obvious to everyone. Bryce, on the other hand, did not seem to be embarrassed at all.

“Rudy, this is Paige Bradford. She’s a business associate. Bradford, this is Rudy—the youngest of Antonio’s five children. He’s the least tactful of all the family members...and the biggest flirt.” Then, with the swiftness that she was beginning to get used to, Bryce changed the subject. “What’s good today, Rudy? Does Maria have something special for a hungry customer?”

Rudy seemed totally unconcerned about the comments concerning his character. “Only a business associate, huh?” He grinned at Paige, then gave her a quick wink before turning his attention back to Bryce. “You’re in luck. Mom just finished making some cannelloni.” He hurried off toward the kitchen.

“I hope you’re hungry, Bradford. Maria doesn’t know the meaning of the word moderate when it comes to portions of food.”

A classically beautiful Italian girl in her early twenties came up behind Bryce, slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. “Papa said you were out here.”

“I’d know that sultry voice anywhere.” He twisted around in his chair, took her hands in his and extended a warm smile. “Angela, how have you been? Last time I was here you were one month away from motherhood.” He slipped his arm around her slim waist and pulled her close to him. His smile quickly shifted to a teasing grin that matched his tone of voice. “Look at this! I can actually get my arm around you now.”

“Twins.” She beamed at him, her total and complete joy covering her face. “A boy and a girl. We named the girl Sofia, after Grandma. And the boy—” the smile faded from her face and tears formed in her beautiful brown eyes “—we named Bryce...” She quickly blinked the tears away and recovered her enthusiasm. “Bryce Antonio Roberto Vincent—”

“Stop, already!” Bryce broke out in an easy laugh. “The poor kid will be an adult before he gets all of his names memorized.”

Paige saw the surprise and the unconcealed emotion dart across his face before he could hide it. She had thought he was merely a good customer over the years, that this very close family were friends of his. But it was now obvious to her that there was more to it than that—much more.

“Bradford, this is Angela. She’s the fourth of Antonio and Maria’s children. Angela, this is Paige Bradford, a business associate of mine.” The two women shook hands.

Angela’s enthusiasm bubbled to the surface. “It’s time for Papa to go home and rest. If I don’t chase him out of here he’ll stay until closing.” She gave Bryce another affectionate kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you later.” She turned her warm smile to Paige. “It was nice meeting you.” With that, she hurried off toward the kitchen.

Before Paige had an opportunity to make any subtle inquiries, Rudy returned with the first course of what turned out to be a complete seven-course meal. As Bryce had promised, the food was excellent and there was plenty of it. Somewhere between the fourth and fifth courses Bryce excused himself from the table, saying he wanted to have a word with Maria. She watched as he disappeared into the kitchen.

The fact that he had twice introduced her as a business associate rather than an employee had not escaped her attention. It seemed to demonstrate a sense of equality where others were concerned. It was the same concept as his personal friendship with the French ambassador and also a working-class Italian family who owned a small restaurant. Her preconceived notions about Bryce Lexington were beginning to crumble. Paige was not happy about it, but was not sure how to stop it. She didn’t have any idea where to place her trust, that little bit of trust she was able to muster. Should she trust her firmly entrenched beliefs or her subsequent observations of this man?

“Quite a remarkable man, no?” It was Angela’s soft voice that captured Paige’s attention.

She wasn’t sure exactly how to respond to Angela’s comment. “He’s definitely unlike anyone I’ve ever met before.”

“You’re a business associate?” Angela flashed Paige a warm and friendly smile. “So are we. Bryce owns twenty-five percent of this restaurant.”

The pride, and it seemed to Paige something almost akin to gratitude, showed on Angela’s face. Paige immediately latched on to the twenty-five percent that Angela had quoted. Angela must have been mistaken. A ruthless shark like Bryce Lexington would not be involved in a business if he did

not own controlling interest. She tried to maintain a casual tone of voice as she subtly probed for answers. “How did your family come to be in business with him?”

“Bryce had been coming into our restaurant for many years, he knew the whole family. Eight months ago Papa had a heart attack, he needed bypass surgery. Things became very bad financially. Our creditors were after us for past-due bills, we were in danger of losing the restaurant. Then on top of everything else, Grandma became very ill. She was still in Italy. Papa wanted very much to be able to see her before she died but there was no money for a trip and Papa had just had the surgery and all. That was when we became business associates with Bryce.”

Angela looked around to make sure no one could hear them. “He took care of all our past-due bills and paid for Papa and Momma to go back to Italy to see Grandma. She died a few days after they arrived. They never would have been able to see her for one last time if it hadn’t been for Bryce. When they got back, he sent Papa to a heart specialist in the United States to make sure everything was okay.”

“Is that when he took part of your business and made himself your partner?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth Paige wanted to bite her tongue. They sounded too caustic. This young woman obviously thought the world of Bryce, as did her entire family. The last thing she wanted to do was attract undue attention to her real motives and intentions.

Angela cocked her head and creased her forehead for a moment, her expression indicating her confusion over Paige’s comments. “Not at all. It was Papa who offered half the restaurant to Bryce to repay the money he had spent on us. Bryce said they would draw up a formal contract for twenty-five percent rather than fifty percent. So far, he hasn’t taken any of his profits out of the business. He says we should hold the money in the bank and use it as an emergency fund, in case Papa gets sick again.”

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