THAT NEW YORK MINUTE
ABBY GAINES
Cherish

Abby Gaines

That New York Minute

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“You said you don’t do chicken soup. You didn’t say you don’t do kissing.”

Rachel’s mouth was no longer quivering … her lips were full and nicely shaped and more tempting than he could believe.

“I don’t do kissing, either,” she said firmly. “Not with you.”

Too bad Garrett couldn’t get the idea out of his head.

“I don’t think you should write off the possibility. I already like your legs.” It wasn’t her legs he was eyeing right now … he found the V of her yellow blouse. “Maybe I’d like the whole—”

“Don’t you dare say hog,” Rachel warned.

“Shebang,” he said, grinning.

Dear Reader,

Last year, I visited New York City. I’d forgotten how incredible it is, how its streets make you feel so alive. Yet despite being frenetic, it’s easy to get around, and friendly.

New York is the setting for some great movies—*An Affair to Remember, Sleepless in Seattle, Two Weeks’ Notice*. The city has also inspired many books … including *That New York Minute*.

In *That New York Minute*, Rachel Frye and Garrett Calder, rivals in a Manhattan advertising agency, are complete opposites—such fun for the writer, helping them find their way to each other!

But they have one thing in common: each needs someone

who'll stick with them no matter what.

My visit to NYC will stay in my heart forever … but not for the obvious reasons. You see, I'd planned to travel there with two of my best friends and fellow authors, Sandra Hyatt and Karina Bliss. We were particularly excited because Sandra was up for an award at the conference we would attend. But a volcanic ash cloud forced the cancellation of my friends' flight; to our mutual devastation, they never made it to NYC.

A few weeks later, Sandra died suddenly of a brain bleed. It was a terrible shock to her family and friends, and a reminder to us all to make time for those we cherish (as, indeed, Sandra always did). I will never get to visit the Big Apple with Sandra, but she will always be in my heart.

You can read more about Sandra, and the Trust established to honor her memory, at www.sandrahyatt.com.

I hope you enjoy *That New York Minute*. To share your thoughts, please e-mail abby@abbygaines.com. To read an After-the-End scene, visit the For Readers page at www.abbygaines.com.

Sincerely,

Abby Gaines

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ABBY GAINES writes contemporary romances for the Mills & Boon® Cherish™ line, and Regency romances for the Love Inspired Books Love Inspired Historical line. Those might sound like two completely different genres, but Abby likes to say she writes "stories that leave you smiling"—wherever and whenever they are set. Her Mills & Boon Cherish novel *The Groom Came Back* won the 2010 Readers Crown Award, and her novella *One in a Million* won the 2011 Readers Crown. *That New York Minute* is Abby Gaines's eighteenth book for Mills & Boon.

Abby loves cooking, reading, skiing and traveling … though not all at once! She lives with her husband and children—and a labradoodle and a cat—in a house with enough stairs to keep her semi-fit and a sun-filled office whose sea view provides inspiration for her writing. Visit her at www.abbygaines.com.

That New York Minute
Abby Gaines

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To the memory of
Sandra Diane Hyde
(1965–2011)
As Sandra Hyatt, a wonderful writer of romance
As a wife and mother, the heart of her family
As a friend…irreplaceable

CHAPTER ONE

HE'S BREAKING UP WITH ME.

Rachel Frye took a swig of champagne. No longer the appropriate drink for the occasion, but she needed something to do with her hands. Something other than clasping them together on the table while she begged Piers not to end it.

Given they were sitting in one of Manhattan's coolest bars, a little dignity was called for.

"Don't get me wrong, you're really attractive and smart. I enjoy spending time with you." Piers leaned forward with the earnestness that Rachel found ninety-nine percent charming and one percent temptation to tell an off-color joke. "But, you know … Oyster?" He pushed the silver plate they were sharing across the highly varnished table for two.

"Thanks," Rachel muttered, as her mind scrambled for compelling arguments as to why they shouldn't break up just yet. She picked up one of the mollusks remaining from the dozen they'd ordered. She'd suggested Crush, a new champagne and oyster bar, for this date because she'd been considering sleeping with Piers tonight.

Also because it was around the corner from her Madison Avenue office, but still. When a woman suggests to her boyfriend of three months that they start their evening at a place serving well-known aphrodisiacs, the last thing she expects is to get

dumped.

She'd unbuttoned two buttons of her blouse, for goodness' sake!

"It's just, I get the feeling we're not on the same page," Piers said.

Rachel realized too late that slurping an oyster from its shell wasn't dignified. She swallowed hastily, the salty mass gliding past the lump in her throat.

Was this about sex? Piers had wanted to sleep with her on the first date, something Rachel would never contemplate. Nor the second. Nor the third. Was it unreasonable to want to believe they might have a future together before she jumped into bed?

"Actually, I think we have a lot in common," she said, as she set the empty shell back on its bed of crushed ice. They were both hardworking, capable people. And Piers had the kind of family she'd *like* to have come from: his father was the second-generation owner of an upstate accounting firm, and his mother ruled the local bridge club with an iron, yet friendly, grip.

"You glanced at your watch when I walked in tonight," he said. It sounded like an accusation.

"I … was checking the time," she said uncertainly. She dabbed at a drop of oyster juice on her chin with her napkin.

"Rachel, I was two minutes late. It's not a crime."

"I never said it was. I never even thought it. *That's* why you're dumping me? Because I looked at my watch?" Ugh, she needed to rein in that shrillness.

She turned away from Piers's concerned gaze to take a deep breath.

And encountered another gaze, this one altogether unsympathetic.

Garrett Calder, her fellow creative director at Key Bowen Crane, New York's largest independent advertising agency, was watching her from his black leather bar stool.

Rachel had noticed him at the bar when she walked in, noticed the bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne—which would set him back at least two hundred bucks in a place like this—in front of him. She'd assumed he was waiting for someone, but he was still alone and she realized there was only one glass on the bar.

She knew the guy was a loner—small wonder, with that scowl on his face—but drinking a bottle of champagne by himself?

"—and it feels like you're *clinging*," Piers said, finishing a sentence she'd failed to hear.

She jerked back to face him. "I don't cling!" She was loyal and committed, sure. But those were good things. "I admit, punctuality is important to me, but I never meant to make you feel, uh, pressured."

What was wrong with him, that a glance at her watch could terrify him into thinking she wanted a pledge of undying love?

Which she didn't. Not yet. She just wanted to be certain the relationship would last more than five minutes.

"We shouldn't rush to break up at the first obstacle," she said, "when there's every chance we can get past it."

Piers was an actuary, a man who calculated risk to the nth degree, and she liked the way his analytical approach spilled over into his personality. There was a lot she liked about him, frankly. His low-key sense of humor, his easy conversation. She was attracted to him physically, and they'd done some serious making out to prove it.

Though now, when she eyed his receding hairline, she saw it for what it was. Imminent baldness, not a sign of dependability.

Nothing wrong with bald. Hair was unarguably a nice-to-have, but it was nowhere near the top of the list.

"When I'm late," Piers said, "I get the feeling that you worry I'm not going to show up. When we're together, I feel like you're always watching me, to make sure I'm still interested. That's a lot of pressure, Rachel."

She forced a laugh. "Piers, I'm a businesswoman with a high-level job and an excellent salary." She felt as if she was interviewing for the role of Steady, Nonclinging Girlfriend. "I hardly think I'm that insecure."

She didn't assume a guy was a no-show after five minutes. It was more that she started to wonder just how reliable he was. She knew it was illogical, so she tried not to let Piers's occasional tardiness color her opinion of him.

She reached across the table for his hand. A nice hand. Neatly squared fingernails. Pale, but that was okay. "I don't think we should be too quick to end a good thing. How about," she continued, lowering her voice to what she hoped was husky, "we

go back to my place and … work this out."

Wariness flickered in his eyes. Then his gaze dropped to those two buttons she'd undone—*about time*—and the hint of black bra she knew he'd see there.

Rachel wriggled her shoulders just a little.

He let out a sigh. "You *are* a very special woman, Rachel," he admitted.

That was more like it! He'd simply had cold feet. Rachel pushed her chair back. It scraped loudly on the wooden floorboards. "Let's go," she said.

Piers stood. "Just so you know, I have an early start tomorrow. I won't be able to stay the night."

She paused as she reached for the jacket she'd slung over the back of her chair. "That's okay, I have a meeting first thing, too." The most important meeting of her life, in fact. But was now the time to be discussing work? "We can do dinner tomorrow, instead of breakfast."

If her meeting went the way she anticipated, they'd be celebrating her inevitable promotion come dinnertime. She grinned at the thought, and her worries about her love life eased.

Piers helped her into her jacket, then pulled some bills from his wallet. When he frowned, Rachel knew he was calculating the seventeen-and-a-half percent tip he liked to leave.

Shouldn't he be tossing money onto the table willy-nilly, in his haste to get out of here and into her bed?

Rachel turned away. And once again met Garrett Calder's

gaze. His scowl had gone. He raised his glass to her in a toast that was intended to be ironic, if the tiny, mocking curve to his lips was anything to go by.

What was that about? She didn't know Garrett well—no one did—but he always managed to unsettle her, even when she was at her most together. Not because of the stupid nickname they gave him in the office: The Shark. That little piece of hyperbole didn't bother her at all. What disturbed her was the blend of intelligence and aloofness in his eyes, the suggestion that he knew everything and he didn't give a damn.

Now he looked as if he knew exactly what had just transpired between her and Piers. Knew they were headed to her bed.

She willed the sudden heat in her cheeks to subside. There was no way Garrett could have overheard their conversation. None.

At last, Piers wedged some neatly folded bills beneath the pepper grinder, and they could leave. The bar's layout and teeming Thursday night crowd meant they had to walk past Garrett. As she drew level with him, she gave him a polite nod.

"Let it go, Rachel," he said.

She stopped, unsure if she'd heard him correctly over the hubbub of reveling office workers. "Excuse me?"

Piers bumped into her, jolting her toward Garrett. Who leaned back against the bar, as if he didn't want her in his space.

"Begging never works," he said, his enunciation careful and unfortunately crystal clear to both her and, she was certain, Piers.

Her heart lurched in her chest. Mortification … and fear.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “You’re drunk.”

An exaggeration, maybe, but he sure wasn’t sober. The bottle next to him was empty.

“Who is this guy?” Piers asked.

“No one. A colleague.” She tugged the lapels of her jacket together, because Garrett’s eyes were definitely straying in that direction. Maybe, when she got her promotion, she could fire him.

The delightful fantasy didn’t last more than a moment. Garrett was too good at his job. Which was how he got away with acting like a jerk.

The bartender removed Garrett’s empty Dom Pérignon bottle and began peeling the foil from around the cork of a second bottle.

“Oh, look, Garrett, your date’s arrived,” Rachel said. “Let’s go, honey.”

Piers looked startled at the endearment, but he took her elbow.

“Just so you know,” Garrett said, “offering a guy sex so he won’t break up with you smacks of desperation.”

The bartender paused in his loosening of the wire cage around the champagne cork and looked Rachel up and down. Was it her imagination, or did he register the black bra and give her a knowing look? Piers let go of her.

“Whatever’s driving you to drink alone, Garrett—” her voice shook “—keep it to yourself.” That was the way he usually

operated. Could he have picked a worse time to attempt something resembling a conversation?

"Sleep with him, by all means," Garrett said, with a generous, alcohol-fueled sweep of his arm toward Piers. "Though, personally, I think you could get a guy with more hair."

Piers's hand went protectively to his head.

"But whatever you do, do it on *your* terms," Garrett said. "Not his."

"Uh, Rachel, I'm going to take a rain check," Piers said. "My early meeting …" He kissed her cheek—were his lips always that dry?—and was gone.

"Wait!" she called.

Too late.

The champagne cork popped; the barman poured the first gush of frothing liquid into Garrett's glass.

Garrett picked up the glass and raised it, once again, to Rachel. "You'll thank me in the morning."

CHAPTER TWO

GRATITUDE WAS *NOT* RACHEL'S primary sentiment as she waited for the elevator in the Key Bowen Crane building lobby at seven o'clock the next morning.

Exhaustion and frustration, on the other hand, were flourishing.

She'd lost a perfectly good boyfriend—okay, maybe not perfect, but who was?—thanks to Garrett. After the way Piers had almost sprinted out of the bar, she didn't believe for a moment that he was only "taking a rain check." When she'd phoned him later, he hadn't picked up.

She and Piers could have made it work, dammit, if not for Garrett's stupid accusation that she was using sex to stop Piers from dumping her.

Kind of hard to get past that. Unfortunately, it had taken Rachel a few hours of tossing and turning to conclude the relationship was beyond salvage.

As she yawned, a ding signaled the arrival of an elevator. It would take at least another twenty seconds before the doors opened. This building was one of the earliest Manhattan skyscrapers and it still had the original elevator cars. Gorgeous … so long as you weren't in a hurry.

The elevator doors wheezed open, and Rachel stepped into the wood-paneled interior. She pressed for the fifty-sixth floor,

hit the door-close button and stepped back to enjoy the rare experience of having the space to herself.

Only to have a laptop bag wedged unceremoniously between the almost-closed doors, forcing them to rumble open again.

To her horror, Garrett Calder followed the bag into the elevator.

"You!" she blurted.

A grunt and a jerk of Garrett's chin acknowledged her as he set his laptop on the floor. He jabbed the button to close the doors.

Charming. Rachel resigned herself to a long ascent. Not that she wanted social chitchat with Garrett, not after last night. She stared straight ahead, focusing vaguely on the safety certificate which, from numerous rides spent avoiding eye contact with other New Yorkers, she knew expired in November.

Garrett leaned against the wall to her left, facing Rachel. *No idea of elevator etiquette*. Mind you, most of her female colleagues would be delighted to have such an excellent view of him. No question he was good-looking, if you liked your men tall, dark and brooding. And with a thick head of hair, damn him.

She'd noticed before that he took up more than his fair share of space. How did he do that? He was tall, but there was no excess bulk to him. Nor could Rachel attribute it to his larger-than-life personality—last night was the chattiest she'd ever seen him. Unfortunately.

The recollection had her shifting in her high heels. She

realized he hadn't selected a floor destination, and stretched a hand toward the panel. "Fifty-four?" That was the floor they both worked on.

He winced and pressed his fingers to his right temple. "Could you please stop shouting?"

His deep voice held a faint croak, suggesting he might actually have finished that second bottle of bubbly. There was no sign of mockery in his dark eyes. In which case … maybe he'd forgotten their conversation. Maybe it was lost in the depths of his hopefully agonizing hangover. She was torn between relief at the thought, and annoyance that he could destroy her relationship without remembering a thing about it.

"Which floor?" she asked, louder.

His eyes, dark as coal, narrowed. "Same as you."

Rachel's hand dropped. "You're going to fifty-six?" To the partners' floor?

Garrett ignored her.

She registered that he was wearing a tie—charcoal gray, an elegant contrast with his dark shirt and perfectly cut black suit. Something shifted, as if the elevator had jolted in its slow, straight course.

No way. She knew exactly how this morning was supposed to pan out. She would attend the partners' breakfast along with the other candidate, schmoozing her heart out with the Key Bowen Crane partners. At the end of breakfast, she would be named partner designate, poised to cement her place in Madison

Avenue's largest independent ad agency. The other candidate would also be named partner designate, though only one of them could ultimately win the partnership, along with the coveted role of chief creative officer.

Rachel knew it would be her. Just yesterday morning, Jonathan Key, chairman of KBC, had said with a no-need-to-worry wink that he was sure she could guess who her competition was.

It wasn't—*couldn't be*—Garrett Calder. He'd been at KBC for mere months, and was renowned for moving on the minute he got bored. Not partner material.

Surely there weren't *two* other candidates? The walls of the elevator seemed to close in. Rachel sucked in a sharp breath—*better*—and checked the illuminated number above the door. Tenth floor. *Hurry up*.

"So, Garrett, when were you invited to the breakfast?" she asked, trying to sound relaxed.

A glint in his eyes suggested she'd fallen somewhere short of the mark. Landed somewhere right around tense. "A couple of weeks ago. I told Tony I wasn't interested, but last night I decided I might as well come along."

Mention of last night made her pause. But this was too important not to pursue.

"What, uh, changed your mind?"

"You did." That glint turned diabolical. Telling her that, hangover or no, he remembered every word.

“I suspect that second bottle of champagne dulled your memory,” Rachel said briskly, trying not to blush. “I did *not* encourage you to attend this meeting.”

“‘Do it on your own terms,’” he quoted.

She racked her memory for when she would have said something so self-absorbed. “*You* said that.”

“Did I? Damn, I’m good.”

Rachel gritted her teeth. “The whole idea of partnership is working with others—it’s not about your own terms.”

He didn’t reply, but one dark eyebrow rose lazily.

Garrett *was* lazy. He arrived around nine most mornings, when other people had been there since seven-thirty. Outrageous that he should think he could turn up to the partners’ breakfast on a drunken whim, and snap up the job she’d been working toward for so long.

“Has your boyfriend cashed in that rain check yet?” he asked.

She clamped her lips together. Then, unable to resist, muttered, “What made you think we were talking about … what you said?” Not that she was about to tell him he was right.

“Been there, done that,” Garrett said. “By which I mean, I’ve been the offer*ee* before. I’ve never begged someone to stay, but I recognize the body language.” He shook his head, all phony sympathy. “Like I told you, begging doesn’t work.”

Rachel’s eyes smarted. She blinked hard, twice. “Here’s some advice right back at you. What happens in the bar stays in the bar.” Switching gears, she said crisply, “So, Garrett, you’ve been

at KBC, what, six months?" But she was well aware it was longer than that that she'd been subjected to his suspiciously bland expression whenever others acclaimed her work.

"Eleven," he said wearily, as if he was already bored with the topic. Or maybe a three-syllable word was too much effort this morning.

"That's got to be a record for you. Come on, Garrett, you don't want to be a partner." He was renowned for his refusal to settle in one firm.

Her insistence had a shrill edge, and he winced. "If I agree I don't want to be a partner, will you shut up?"

As if he would be so agreeable. He hadn't earned his nickname—The Shark—by backing down from a fight. No, that moniker was born of his reputed killer instinct for winning pitches. It had become one of those self-fulfilling prophecies—Rachel suspected he had an advantage over rivals intimidated by being up against The Shark.

Not today. She wasn't about to be intimidated.

He probably made the name up himself. Which was good marketing, she'd admit. Perhaps she should start calling herself … The Terrier.

Didn't have quite the same ring to it.

A glance at the numbers above the elevator door revealed they were at the twenty-fourth floor.

"I guess Tony had his reasons for inviting you to attend this morning," she said, "but, Garrett, you won't win. Why put

yourself through that?" Perhaps she could convince him to get out on fifty-four.

He didn't say anything. Tension flattened his lips and he obviously had a pounding headache. Drawing his dark eyebrows together in that thunderous way wouldn't help the pain. He must realize, in his heart, that she was right. He was an outsider, and everyone knew that outsiders seldom won. Rachel's shoulders relaxed. She could almost feel sorry for him.

Maybe that's why he was drinking alone last night. Out of a sense of inadequacy.

She ignored the fact that the word didn't gel with anything about him.

"It's not about you," she assured him. "I've been at KBC eight years. Around here that counts for something."

His expression lightened, as if he'd heard her entirely reasonable explanation and discounted it. Rachel shifted uneasily as he scanned her, top to toe, lightning fast.

"You must have joined when you were twelve." His tone was chatty.

Garrett Calder didn't make idle conversation.

"I was eighteen," she said warily. "I started in the mail room."

"She Worked Her Way to the Top," he intoned.

"You bet I did." Her response was clipped—he didn't get to mock her achievement.

"So, it's your eight years versus my eight gold CLIO awards," he mused, sounding a whole lot more cheerful. "Think they might

count for something?"

Eight gold CLIOs! It was practically obscene, how successful he'd been in the advertising industry's equivalent of the Oscars. *But those awards came while he was working at five different companies. And he's made more enemies than friends.* Making partner was about loyalty and long term. *Rachel* was about loyalty and long term.

She dismissed his awards with a *pff*. "Style over substance."

The Shark bared his teeth. It might have been a smile. Then again, he might have been anticipating dragging her beneath the surface and chomping on her drowned body.

Rachel folded her arms across her chest, realized she looked defensive and dropped her hands to her sides. *Surely we must be nearly*—nope, only the thirty-sixth floor.

"I have an excellent track record, and that's how I'll get the partnership," she assured him.

"Right," he said encouragingly.

He clearly meant *Wrong*.

"Do you know something?" she demanded.

He closed his eyes. "You're shouting again. And I'm having a bad week. Bad enough that I might take off this stupid tie and gag you with it."

He was a jerk. Jerks didn't make partner at KBC. It was different at some other agencies, but not here.

He's a jerk with eight gold CLIOs.

She shouldn't bother explaining, but the urge to convince him

he was wasting his time was overwhelming. “It’s not just the eight years. I’ve put in more hours than anyone, I’ve won more pitches …”

“You’ve won a bunch of clients too scared to do anything interesting,” he said. “Your work is tame.”

Rachel clenched her jaw to hold back her outrage. Tame! She prided herself on her ability to take clients beyond their expectations.

“Do you want to know what your weakness is?” Garrett asked.

“No.”

“It’s those eight years,” he said. “You’re relying on past experience, but everything can change in a heartbeat around here.” He folded his arms, and on him it didn’t look defensive. “In a New York minute, you could say.”

She’d never liked the song “New York Minute,” with its suggestion that everything—business, family, life—could be turned on its head any moment.

“Your weakness is that you don’t think on your feet,” Garrett said. “Reacting to those moments of insight, freeing yourself from reliance on what others have told you, is what drives creative power.”

As if she would trust the impulse of a moment over a carefully crafted solution. Her hands fisted at her sides. “You don’t get to waltz in here with your Dom Pérignon hangover and your eight CLIOs and your custom-made suits and your fancy cologne—”

“I don’t wear cologne.” He spread his hands, palm out, as if

declaring himself innocent of some heinous crime.

Wow, The Shark sure knew how to zero in on the main issue.

"Uh-huh. So you just happened to sleep on a bed of—" she sniffed "—pine needles and citrus peel."

Ever so slowly, one corner of his mouth kicked up.

The effect was more potent than any full-throated laugh. It was that stupid Shark thing, Rachel thought crossly. It gave him an aura of power.

"Whatever it is you're smelling, Rach, it's all me," he said. "Cologne is for sissies."

No way a man could smell this good without help. "Rach*el*," she corrected. "Strange, I don't remember that sissies line from your award-winning Calvin Klein Fragrance campaign."

"That was last year. I believed in cologne last year."

Typical of his *here today, gone tomorrow* style. "Whereas I prefer to take a long-term, truth-based approach," she said. Which did *not* mean she was tame.

Garrett gave her a pained look through half-closed eyes. "Integrity in advertising," he said. "Interesting concept. But not, I fear, a partnership-winning one."

Floor fifty-one. Nearly there, thank goodness.

"Who else do you think will be here this morning?" Garrett asked abruptly.

No thinking required. "Just Clive."

"That's what I figured."

Clive Barnes was the only other executive creative director,

the same level as Rachel and Garrett. His seniority meant he had to be on the partnership shortlist. But…

"Clive's a nice guy," Rachel said.

"You know what they say about nice guys." Garrett's white teeth flashed.

Out of loyalty to Clive, who'd been at KBC almost as long as she had, she sent him a disapproving look. But she didn't consider Clive a threat, either.

The elevator dinged to indicate they'd reached their destination. Finally. She couldn't wait to get out of here and spend a few minutes alone, restoring the calm confidence she would need during breakfast. She stepped toward the doors, but they didn't open.

Garrett pressed the open button. Nothing happened.

"Come on," Rachel muttered.

Garrett was already stabbing at the intercom. It rang three times—prompting more wincing from the hungover Shark—before an operator answered.

"We'll have you out of there in a jiffy, sir," the woman chirped, once she ascertained how many people were in the elevator and that no one needed medical treatment. "Well, when I say a jiffy … hmmm … okay, we have a software glitch, but don't you folks worry about a thing!" She hung up.

Rachel groaned.

"Just go with the flow," Garrett advised her. "Live in the moment."

She turned her nerves on him. “I don’t know why you bothered to come in when you’re so, *ahem*—” sarcastic, fake throat-clearing “—unwell. Get real, Garrett, and get out of here. You don’t have a serious shot at this partnership.”

He eyed her for a long, silent moment. “You remind me of someone,” he said. “Someone I don’t like.”

Ow. That definitely qualified as a shark-nip. One she deserved, if she was honest—she shouldn’t have let him rile her.

But you should never show weakness to a shark.

“Your opinion won’t matter when I get the partnership,” she said. “I’ll be your boss.”

His hands slid into his pockets and he leaned back against the wall. Instead of being scared off by her splashing about, she had the distinct impression The Shark was beginning to circle.

“Protesting too much, methinks,” he said.

He couldn’t really believe he would beat her, could he?

The intercom buzzed. Rachel lunged for the answer button. Garrett reached it first; her fingers, clammy with sudden anxiety, pressed against his. She whipped her hand away.

“How’re you folks doing?” the operator trilled. “Just wanted to let you know we’re almost done fixing you up. We’ll have you out in that beautiful New York summer day in just a—”

“Jiffy,” Rachel muttered. She pressed the off button. “Thanks a lot, Doris freakin’ Day.”

Garrett said, “My mother used to love Doris Day movies.” Something flashed across his face, maybe shock that he’d told

her that much about himself.

"So your mom has bad taste," Rachel said. "She probably likes *you*, too … though if she's ever seen you hungover and surly she might think twice about—"

She stopped. His face had shut down so completely, it was as if he was no longer in the elevator.

Uh-oh. "Um, Garrett, when you said your mother *used* to love Doris Day, was that past tense because Doris Day retired, or—" she cringed "—because your mom died?"

He stared at the stuck doors as if he could see right through them. *Now* he rode the elevator like a proper New Yorker. "Both."

Damn. "I'm sorry," Rachel said. It felt inadequate, when she'd been sniping at him the last fifty-six floors. "How did she—how long ago …?"

His gaze cut to her. "Today's my birthday."

She grabbed the non sequitur gratefully. "Happy birthday! So, that champagne last night …"

"It's also the anniversary of my mother's death," he said. "So, yeah, I'm hungover and surly, as you so delicately phrased it, but I have my reasons."

His skin looked suddenly pale in the elevator lighting. Rachel opened her mouth, but couldn't think of a thing to say.

"And, yeah," he continued, "maybe Doris Day is too perky and not to your taste, but when my mom was dying of cancer, those movies were the only thing that kept her smiling through

months of chemo. Doris Day was the difference between an unbearable day and an okay one."

Man, she had totally screwed up. "Garrett, I didn't know. I'm sorry." Rachel stretched out a hand, half thinking he might bite her arm off. Half *wanting* him to because she felt like such a jerk.

Before she could get within prey distance, the elevator doors hissed open.

Garrett shot her one last disgusted look, and left.

CHAPTER THREE

RACHEL PULLED THE END OFF her croissant and shredded it into tiny pieces.

She'd far from sparkled throughout breakfast, which should have been an opportunity to impress those partners she didn't work with. She'd been distracted first by Garrett's presence, then by her guilt over dissing his mother. On the anniversary of her death. Which happened to be Garrett's birthday.

She groaned inwardly.

Her one weakness in her work was that she wasn't good in unexpected situations. Give her a creative briefing and a week, and she could come up with a fabulous pitch. Ask her to spout ideas off the cuff and she was hopeless. This morning's breakfast … it wasn't a pitch, but she'd prepared for it in the same way, thinking hard about how she could outshine Clive Barnes, anticipating questions.

She hadn't imagined Garrett would wreck her relationship last night, then show up like a hungover nemesis this morning. Or that she would say something so tactless as to leave him looking utterly bleak. No wonder she had zero spur-of-the-moment techniques for outclassing him in the eyes of the other partners.

At the far end of the Key Bowen Crane boardroom table, Tony Bowen, chief executive officer, pushed himself out of his maroon

leather chair. An immediate hush fell.

"I hope you all enjoyed your breakfast," he said.

Rachel murmured her appreciation for the shredded croissant on the plate in front of her. Garrett hadn't eaten, either, probably more from nausea than nerves—he'd drained a couple of cups of black coffee. Only Clive had tucked into his food with gusto.

"It's time to get down to business," Tony said. "We don't call this the partnership shortlist announcement breakfast for nothing."

Rachel laughed politely.

"So I'm delighted to announce that our three candidates are Clive Barnes, Garrett Calder and Rachel Frye."

Why did he say my name last? Please, let it be alphabetical.

A round of applause from the existing partners. Only one of them was female. Definitely time for another woman on the team.

"It's been some years since our last partnership vacancy, but the selection process hasn't changed," Tony said. "All three candidates will be required to prepare a new client pitch, with the help of their team. And I'm delighted to say that this year, we have an opportunity that's worthy of your best efforts." He paused for effect. "Brightwater Group."

Wow. One of the largest private education providers in the country was looking for a new ad agency? The account would run into tens of millions of dollars.

Rachel took quick stock of her rivals. Clive's expression was

neutral—he was strongest in sports advertising, so this wasn't his forte. Farther down the table, Garrett's eyes were closed. Was he asleep, or was his shark-brain already devising some incredible campaign that would blow hers out of the water?

Not on my watch, buster. When it came to expensive fragrance or luxury cruises, Garrett might be hard to beat. But for campaigns aimed at the family market—Aunt Betty's pies were a prime example—Rachel was the go-to gal. Brightwater was exactly the kind of account where she excelled. Its facilities might be private, but it was targeted firmly at lower income families.

The confidence Garrett had managed to puncture with his stabs at her creative ability surged back. *I can do this*.

"We want all of you to have every chance to impress us."

Tony was talking about the partnership; Rachel steered her attention away from The Shark.

"That's why we're going to be up-front about the reservations we have about each of you as partner material," Tony said.

Reservations?

"Ladies first." Tony nodded at Rachel.

Oh, yeah, the not-good-at-thinking-on-my-feet thing. She tried to simultaneously sit up straight and look flexible. Garrett smirked.

"Rachel, you've been with us a long time, and your loyalty means a lot to us," Tony said.

She smiled loyally.

"But we wonder if that makes your work a little … what's the

word … stale?"

Excuse me?

"No, that's not it," he said. "*Safe*. Your team's work is solid, but safe."

Was that the same as *tame*, as Garrett had called it?

"Well, Tony—" Rachel cleared her throat, her face hot "—my clients place a lot of trust in me, and I honor that trust by not taking unnecessary risks."

A faint snort from Garrett, who no doubt thought that taking risks won CLIOs.

Possibly true.

"The results of my campaigns speak for themselves," she said.

"They do," Tony agreed. "And they're saying *safe*. We'd like to see your work winning some awards out there in the marketplace."

"You've always said KBC is about more than flashy awards," she reminded him. "It's about teamwork, and the whole being greater than the sum of the parts."

Garrett snorted again, louder this time. Obviously a loner like him wouldn't share that view.

Tony chuckled. "Seems our clients are quite attached to those gold statues. Bottom line, Rachel, if you want to make partner, we'll need to see more risk-taking, more brilliance." Why didn't he just come out and say it: more *Garrett*.

Rachel forced a smile. "Then that's exactly what you'll get, Tony." Dammit, risky brilliance was so not her thing. The

partners would likely never have made such a demand, if Garrett hadn't come in and made her look *tame*.

"Moving on to you, Garrett." Tony grinned at Mr. Brilliant Risk-Taker. "From the day you arrived at KBC, you've shaken up our creative work and we're all the better for it."

Garrett nodded an acknowledgment.

"Obviously you've moved around the industry somewhat," Tony continued.

"I've had some excellent jobs," Garrett agreed. Which wasn't what Tony had said. "I appreciate the chance to make partner at KBC."

Why now? Rachel wondered. *Why here?* She knew why *she* wanted—needed—this partnership, but why couldn't Garrett keep on flitting around the industry?

"Good, good." Tony nodded his approval. "But the real issue for us is your team skills."

Garrett stilled. Rachel half expected to hear the *da dum … da dum …* theme from *Jaws*.

Tony looked slightly nervous. "A partner must be capable of motivating a team and forging strong interpersonal connections."

Based on something other than fear of losing a limb, Rachel could have added. Just last week she'd spent half an hour in the women's washroom comforting a junior account exec Garrett had chewed out.

Exactly the kind of behavior that made him unsuited to the one-and-only partnership up for grabs.

"We'd like to see more evidence of your ability to engage with your colleagues, in particular your team," Tony said. Several other partners nodded.

"I can do that." Garrett's voice was arctic.

Ha! It was all very well to sit there broodingly handsome, *but handsome is as handsome does, buddy*. The old aphorism of her mother's made Rachel smile for the first time since he'd stepped into her elevator.

Mom was right … which meant this wasn't so bad. Garrett might be a genius, but he had never made the slightest effort to engage with others, and he was well-known for his scathing put-downs. A shark didn't change its spots—fins?—that easily.

All I have to do is let Garrett harpoon himself in the foot with his own inability to be part of the team. The partnership's still mine.

"Excellent." Tony rubbed his hands together. "That's it, then. Good luck to all of you." He raised his coffee cup in a toast, then sat down.

"Uh, Tony?" Rachel said. "What about Clive?"

A lip quirk from Garrett … but he looked interested in Tony's answer.

Clive, ever the nice guy, said, "Thanks, Rachel," as if he meant it.

"Sorry, Clive." Tony didn't bother to get up. "What can I say? Your last couple of creatives have really sung, your team's working great together … we're very impressed. Just keep doing

what you're doing."

Rachel's gaze swung to Garrett—she saw her own shock mirrored in his eyes. *Clive Barnes* could do nothing to improve? Did that make him the front-runner? Now that she thought about it, he'd won a CLIO a few years back.

Dammit, how had this meeting gone so wrong? If she'd been more on the ball she wouldn't have allowed Tony to get away with saying she was too "safe," wouldn't have allowed the others to agree. With her lack of a real denial, she'd effectively proved his point. *Idiot*.

"There's something else you all need to know," Tony said.

He launched into a commentary on the tough economic climate. Advertising budgets were down, in line with household expenditure. Old news. Was he softening them up for an announcement that the chief creative officer wouldn't earn as much as they might hope? Disappointing, but money wasn't everything.

Rachel popped a flake of croissant into her mouth.

"I want you to know that this is as difficult for me to say as it is for you to hear," Tony said.

She paused in her chewing.

"HR has been assessing our staffing needs in the current economic climate," he continued. "They've determined that KBC is top-heavy."

"Too many partners?" Garrett suggested.

Rachel fought an inappropriate urge to laugh. *Go ahead,*

Garrett, that ought to win you a few votes. Not. She swallowed her croissant.

"Not exactly," Tony said. "Too many executive creative directors."

The croissant stuck in her throat; Rachel coughed.

There were three executive creative directors at KBC, and they were all in this room.

"You want to get rid of one of us," Garrett said. Way too calmly. Didn't he realize this was a disaster?

"*Two* of you." Tony turned disaster into cataclysm. Rachel felt as if her throat was closing up. Her eyes started to water.

"Whoever isn't named chief executive officer will be deemed surplus to requirements and therefore redundant." He might have couched it in HR-speak, but they all knew what he meant. *Fired*.

Rachel gulped down her cold coffee, clearing the stuck croissant. "Tony, you can't mean that. We're all assets to the firm. *Loyal* assets."

Okay, Garrett wasn't loyal, but she didn't need to point that out.

"*Expensive* assets," Tony said. "And I have a hundred and eighty-five loyal staff on the two floors below. If we don't rationalize, the whole company suffers. This will give us a chance to promote a couple of deserving people to creative director."

The firm already had four creative directors, a level lower than executive director and therefore less well compensated.

"This approach seems shortsighted," Clive said. "The firm's

reputation is likely to suffer."

"We believe this will be a wonderful opportunity for junior staff to rise to the occasion," Tony said. "Now, it goes without saying that all of this is confidential. It's only fair to give you guys a heads-up, but we don't want staff to feel it's not worth giving every one of your pitches their absolute best."

Rachel glanced at Garrett and for one brief moment, she could read his thoughts, plain as day. Total contempt for Tony's maneuverings. An intention to quit in disgust.

Do it, she urged him silently. *Move on to your next firm now. Improve my odds*.

To her disappointment, Garrett said nothing. Maybe he would quit later.

Tony stood, signaling the meeting was over. Dazed, Rachel pushed back her chair, headed for the elevator with Garrett and Clive.

Her stomach churned. Fired. *I could be fired*. Eight years, up in smoke, just like that.

We can start over. Another of her mother's sayings.

But I can't. I can't start over again. I won't.

The elevator spat them out onto the floor where the real work was done. It was barely eight o'clock, but most people were at their desks.

Garrett peeled off to the left, ignoring the few greetings called out to him. Rachel took some hope from that. He really was useless with people.

She headed to her own office, her progress slowing as she stopped to answer Alice's question about the storyboard she was working on, to inquire after Natasha's boyfriend's torn Achilles tendon, to congratulate Talia on her engagement and admire the ring.

At last she was in her office. Rachel stopped still, and surveyed all the things that anchored her here. Her Carolina beech desk, her red leather ergonomic chair, the whiteboard where she and the team spent long evenings brainstorming, the glass wall that allowed her to look out on "her" domain.

"How'd it go?" Haylee, the team admin, walked in behind her, a small sheaf of mail in her hand.

The mailroom, where Rachel had started, was now officially titled the communications center, handling actual letters and packages only a small part of its work.

"Not great." Rachel perched on the edge of her desk and forced a smile. "I failed to fire on all cylinders." For now, she would respect Tony's request for confidentiality about the imminent sacking of two of the executive creative directors.

"That's not like you." Haylee fiddled with the cord of the window-blinds until they were wide-open, exposing the view of Madison Avenue far below.

"I said something to Garrett that put me off balance." Rachel nodded in acknowledgment of Haylee's small sound of surprise —Haylee hadn't expected Garrett to be on the list, either. "A stupid joke about his mom, and it turns out she's dead."

Her distraction might have even worse consequences than she'd feared. How many of the partners would deem her unworthy of even her current job based on today's performance? The sooner Garrett quit, the better.

Haylee grimaced. "Oh, yeah, his mom died in that plane crash."

Rachel frowned. "No, it was cancer."

"Uh-uh," Haylee said with complete certainty. "It was a plane crash. One of those scenic flights … at Thanksgiving, maybe five, six years ago? I asked Garrett about his family back when he joined, and he told me. Poor guy, he's still pretty cut up about it."

Rachel froze.

Garrett's sob story about the chemo and the Doris Day movies and "the difference between a miserable day and an okay one"… *He'd made it up?*

Why?

What kind of person would lie about his mother's death?

She scanned the work area beyond the glass wall, where her colleagues, the hardest-working group of people she knew—people she might soon be forced to leave—bustled around. Then she saw him.

Garrett, chatting to Julie, a junior creative—one of *Rachel's* junior creatives—his face a study in determined friendliness.

Julie looked overwhelmed … then, when Garrett touched her shoulder lightly, she peered up at him through demurely lowered lashes.

What the—? Before she even thought about what she was doing, Rachel had crossed to the glass wall, banged it hard with the palm of her hand.

"Rachel?" Haylee said.

Julie looked up, waved and returned to her work. Garrett swiveled to face Rachel. Their eyes met.

The events of the past twelve hours flashed through her mind. Last night in the bar, this morning's elevator ride, the meeting, her guilty discomfort, her distraction, the way she hadn't fought back when her work was questioned. What had Garrett said in the elevator? *"You don't react in the moment. That's your weakness."*

Last night took on a whole new significance. Garrett had known he would see her in this morning's meeting and he'd set out to humiliate her. Still, she could have recovered from that. But this morning, he'd spun her that garbage about his mother knowing it would set her off-kilter.

That one minute—that New York minute, as he called it—had changed everything.

Rachel didn't have it in her to hide her outrage. Garrett took careful observation of her rigid posture, her hand still slammed against the glass, her doubtless heightened color.

One side of his mouth curled.

What kind of person lies about his mother's death?

Not a person … a Shark. A slimy, ruthless predator.

And the blood in the water was hers.

CHAPTER FOUR

GARRETT WATCHED HIS FATHER approaching, plowing through the crowded bar like a frigate through a flotilla of pleasure craft.

Garrett drained his beer glass. The beer here at O'Dooley's was on tap, rather than the bottled beers favored by the other bars in the locale. "Here comes my date," he told Clive Barnes.

Clive took one look at Admiral Dwight Calder's uniform—service khakis, suggesting there'd been no high-powered meetings today—and much-decorated chest, and stood. "I feel like I should salute," he said out of the corner of his mouth, though the admiral would never hear him over the din of the Friday-night drinkers.

"Don't encourage him," Garrett said.

Clive polished off his beer. "Time I went home to Wifey." He nodded to Garrett's father as he left.

"Who was that?" his father asked. He pulled out the chair Clive had vacated and sat.

"A colleague."

Dwight frowned. "He was wearing a pink shirt."

"I have one just like it at home," Garrett lied. He cursed his own childish reaction. When would he learn not to rise to his dad's narrow views? "You want a beer?" he asked.

"Thanks." Dwight glanced around the bar. "So, this is the kind

of place you hang out."

Garrett signaled to one of the waiters, distinctive in green polos with a shamrock motif, to bring two beers. "Sometimes."

Not often, actually. He wasn't much of a social drinker, and drinking alone didn't appeal—last night excepted. But when his father had asked to meet tonight, Garrett hadn't wanted to commit to a whole meal. He'd suggested his dad meet him here at seven, giving him plenty of time for the "drink and chat" that Clive had suggested.

Neither he nor his dad was a fan of small talk, so they waited for their beers in silence.

Garrett pondered his conversation with Clive, who'd been keen to understand how genuine Garrett's interest in the partnership was.

The truth? He'd initially refused to let his name go forward because a partnership smacked too much of losing his independence. But his refusal had niggled at him. He wasn't sure if he'd done the right thing. At the last minute, he'd decided he might as well keep his options open.

This morning, his knee-jerk reaction to Tony's announcement had been to quit. He didn't doubt for a second that he could outperform both Rachel and Clive, but that wasn't the point. He hated that kind of manipulation.

But even worse, he hated to display his emotions in public. He would quit on Monday, right after he told Tony, in private, what he thought of KBC's idiotic plan to save money. Garrett wasn't

about to hang around in a firm that thought so little of him it would toss him out on a whim. Always be the first to leave—the philosophy had served him well.

He would walk out of KBC with no regrets. Last night, two bottles of champagne had convinced him the partnership was something he could do on his own terms. This morning had proven him wrong, and that was fine. Like he'd told Rachel yesterday, "Let it go."

Of course, he'd been aware of the irony of those words. Aware he was drinking in a futile attempt to *let go* himself. He'd failed, as he did at this time every year, to stem the rising tide of regret. Of bitterness.

Rachel's situation had seemed blessedly uncomplicated, compared with his own inner turmoil. It was obvious her boyfriend was dumping her; equally obvious she was hanging on for dear life. Begging.

Twice in his life Garrett had begged. *Big mistake*.

The waiter arrived. He set down two beers and a bowl of nuts, picked up the old glasses and started to leave. Dwight cleared his throat significantly, then lowered his gaze a fraction to indicate a ring of liquid on the table. The waiter muttered an apology as he wiped the table, double-quick.

Garrett took a slug of his second drink of the night, which at last took the edge off the headache he'd been squinting through all day. He just wanted to get through this meeting, or whatever it was, and go home to bed.

His father cleared his throat again, but this time it wasn't in lieu of a spoken command. "Many happy returns of the day."

His dad would never say *Happy Birthday* if he could find a more formal alternative.

"Thanks." Garrett forced himself to respond reasonably, instead of saying something inflammatory like, *What do you care?*

A woman carrying a guitar squeezed past their table, followed a moment later by two guys, one of them also lugging a guitar case. Must be the band, headed for the small stage in the far corner.

"Did you. Do anything special?" Dwight asked. He never said *um* or *uh*, so any hesitation sounded like a full stop. "Thirty is. A milestone." He took a quick drink.

Two hesitations in the space of a minute. What was going on?

"I got shortlisted for partner at KBC today," Garrett said, buying himself time to work out his dad's agenda.

Why had he said that? What was the point of telling his father about a promotion that he didn't intend to stick around to get? It wasn't as if Dad would be impressed.

He braced himself for a lecture about getting a "real job." Namely, one in the armed forces, one that mattered.

His father surprised him by saying, "Good." He took another drink of his beer. Not his usual measured pace.

"If I get the partnership—" *shut up*, Garrett warned himself, *stop right there, you're not doing this* "—I'll be chief creative

officer." Dammit, the alcohol he'd consumed over the past twenty-four hours had loosened his mouth.

Dwight's glass thudded onto the table. "Chief *creative* officer?"

This was why Garrett should have stopped.

"What would anyone there know about being an *officer?*" his father asked. "About discipline and structure?"

"Nothing at all," Garrett said with heartfelt relief. His father's rigid adherence to *discipline and structure* were what had driven them apart, and Garrett's choice of career had done nothing to fill the gap. Dwight derided the advertising industry as frivolous, billions of dollars spent giving people choices they didn't need. As far as he was concerned, there was only one way to do anything: his way.

As Dwight leaned forward the four metal stars on his collar denoting his rank, polished to a high gleam, caught the light. "Wouldn't a job like that involve commanding a team?"

"Leadership is part of it, yes." Might as well give his father enough rope to hang him.

"You don't have the right attitude for that," Dwight said. "You need to blend authority with a genuine interest in your men."

"I'm definitely not interested in men," Garrett agreed, using flippancy, guaranteed to drive his father nuts, to mask his annoyance.

Without knowing the first thing about it, Dwight had decided Garrett didn't deserve the promotion. Garrett was tempted to

prove him wrong. To stick around, win the partnership. Then quit, which would give Tony and the other partners a lesson in how not to run a partnership selection.

Not worth the hassle, he decided. There were other agencies he could go to right away. Lots of them.

Dwight was inhaling noisily, his face turning slightly purple. If Garrett had been one of his father's "men," he'd have feared imminent court-martial.

"If you want to learn leadership, Garrett, you should get a real job," Dwight said. "You could make something of yourself."

Here we go. Garrett drained his glass, glad he hadn't been naive enough to think they could survive a whole meal. He stood. "See you around, Dad," he said, confident it was highly unlikely. Madison Avenue might not be far from USUN, the United States Mission to the United Nations, where his father was an adviser, but their paths never intersected.

"Sit down," Dwight ordered.

Yeah, right. Garrett wasn't about to start obeying his father's commands at this late stage. He left the role of the "good son" to his brother, Lucas.

"Please," Dwight said.

Garrett stared. *Dad learned a new word*.

When his father pointed at the chair, he sat down again.

Dwight closed his eyes for a moment before he spoke. "I know this is a. Difficult day for you."

"But not for you?" Garrett asked.

Irony was wasted on his father. “That’s why I wanted to see you.”

His birthday, the anniversary of his mother’s death—not everything he’d told Rachel had been a lie—had been a difficult day every year for the past fifteen years. This was the first time Dwight had acknowledged it. “Are you sick?” Garrett asked.

It would surely be divine retribution for the lies that had Rachel so riled, if his father suddenly confessed to a terminal illness. Not that Garrett felt the least bit guilty about Rachel. He’d done her a favor, telling her a plain truth last night. This morning, she’d got up his nose with her superiority and her dismissal of his abilities. She’d reminded him, in fact, of his father.

Only she’d been far easier to topple than Admiral Dwight Calder. She didn’t have the backing of the U.S. Navy to make her feel infallible.

“I’m not sick,” Dwight said.

Relief rushed through Garrett. He tilted his chair back. “Then why are you here?”

Over on the far side of the room, the band was running a sound check. In another five minutes, there’d be no possibility of conversation.

“It’s time you and I made more of an effort with each other,” his father said.

Garrett’s chair thumped back on to all four legs. “Are you going to tell me this was your idea?” he asked calmly.

“Stephanie suggested it,” Dwight admitted.

“Tell your wife to butt out.” Garrett kept his voice even, masking the upsurge of anger. He didn’t know why Stephanie should pick now, after all this time, to take an interest in his relationship with his father. He didn’t *want* to know.

A whine of feedback came through the amplifier on the tiny stage, hurting his ears.

“She’s your stepmother,” Dwight said with icy control.

But they both knew that in this area, Dwight had never been able to control his son.

Garrett stood again, and this time, nothing would induce him to sit back down. “Goodbye, Dad.”

RACHEL WAS DECIDEDLY on edge early Saturday morning as she mooched around her Washington Heights condo—not a great area, but the best she could afford when she’d bought the place two years ago.

She’d been convinced Garrett would quit rather than give KBC a chance to fire him.

Yet when he left the office last night with Clive—worrying in itself—The Shark didn’t appear to have cleared out his desk.

Maybe he didn’t want to quit on his birthday, she thought, as she wiped the kitchen counter. If it was truly his birthday, and that wasn’t another lie.

She tossed the dishcloth in the washing machine, and set about plumping up the cushions of her giant sofa. She’d never have predicted Garrett would be interested in the partnership in the first place. What if he didn’t quit after all?

Their prospective client, Brightwater Group, was tickled pink at the prospect of not one but three fabulous ideas for their campaign, in exchange for giving feedback to the KBC board about the three partners designate. Rachel was beginning to feel like a contestant on *America's Next Top Ad Agency Partner*.

She hated those shows. She wasn't a crier by nature, but she cried when people got thrown out of the house, expelled from the island, kicked off the catwalk.

I could be next. She felt nauseous just thinking about it. If Garrett did stick around, his slimy behavior today had given her a heads-up that he wasn't about to play fair. *If he wants a fight, he'll get it*. She would put the work in, she would leave nothing to chance and she would win.

This would have to be her best campaign ever. She would have to be the best every step of the way. Starting with the meeting she, Garrett and Clive would attend at Brightwater's offices on Monday.

Rachel usually handled briefing meetings with ease. But this time the client would be directly comparing her with Garrett.

What if they *liked* sleazy, lying, tardy but highly creative jerks?

What if the client asked some off-the-wall question, to which she would say her usual, "Hmm, you make an excellent point, Ben/Jerry/Jack. I'd like to think about that and get back to you." While Garrett would produce some amazing spontaneous insight.

It didn't bear thinking about. She needed to be even better

prepared than usual, so she could at least *look* unrehearsed and intuitive. Okay, the logic was skewed … but that was what she had to do.

Starting right now.

An hour later, Rachel loaded her overnight bag into the trunk of a rented Ford Focus, along with a supply of Aunt Betty's Apple Pies, courtesy of her *very appreciative* client—how many bottles of Calvin Klein fragrance had Garrett been given, huh?—and joined the weekend crawl out of Manhattan. Once she was through the Holland Tunnel, she stuck to the toll roads, and the traffic thinned right out.

It was only eleven o'clock when she pulled into The Pines Mobile Home Park in Freehold, New Jersey. She followed the loop road, if you could call the vaguely circular stretch of gravel a road, around to her parents' trailer.

Her mom must have heard the crunch of her tires, because the door of the double-wide opened before Rachel switched off her engine.

"Hi, Mom," Rachel called as she grabbed her bag from the backseat. She loaded up an armful of pies, then closed the door with her butt.

"Honey, did you tell us you were coming—oh, yum!" Nora Frye's eyes lit up at the sight of the red-and-white pie cartons.

Rachel kissed her cheek and handed over the booty. "Kind of a last-minute decision—is that okay?" Cell phone reception wasn't great here, and it was always a hassle to phone the trailer-

park office and hope they'd get a message to her parents.

"That's fine, though I guess we'll have to cancel our trip to Paris," her mother said gaily, leading the way inside. As she crossed the threshold, she raised her voice. "Burton, Rachel's here!"

"Did he work last night?" Rachel asked. Her dad's burly build meant he easily found a job as a security guard whenever her parents' other schemes fell through.

"Got to bed at five," her mom confirmed, "but he can wake up for you."

Rachel followed her mom to the small kitchen area. While Nora filled the kettle Rachel had given her last Christmas and set it on the stove, Rachel dug in her purse to produce a pack of real coffee. Her mom set the jar of instant she'd been opening back on the shelf, and reached high for the French press, covered with a film of dust.

"So, what's new?" Her mom squirted detergent into the press and began to wash it.

"I made the partner short list at work."

Her mom gave a little squawk. "Hon, that's fantastic!"

"I know. Thanks." Just thinking about it had Rachel grinning. She pushed aside the "I might get fired" aspect as she found some scissors in a drawer and snipped the top off the coffee pack. When she was certain her mom wasn't watching, she tucked a folded twenty-dollar bill in the back of the drawer.

By the time they'd carried their cups over to the table by

the window, Rachel's dad had emerged from the bedroom. He hugged Rachel before he pulled out one of the nonmatching chairs and sat. "That coffee for me, Nora?"

Her mom slid the third mug toward him. While she fussed with cream and sugar, Rachel took the opportunity to stuff another twenty down the gap between the seat pad and the back of the built-in banquette she occupied. Anything more than twenty and her parents would get suspicious.

Her dad took a sip of the hot coffee and let out a satisfied sigh. "Home is where the coffee is, right, Nora?"

"That's right, hon." Nora blew him a kiss.

Rachel tensed. Comments like that made her want to chime in with something like, "Home is where you put down roots. Where you decide to stick it out, no matter what."

Rachel blew on her coffee so she wouldn't meet his eyes and feel compelled to disagree. Pointing out their fundamental differences in philosophy only led to circular arguments that, despite being right, she never won.

"I'm hoping I can pick your brains," she said, changing the subject. Her family came in very handy when she wanted to run ideas by them or have them try out a new product. It was her mom who'd said, "This is better'n I make, don't you think, Burton?" the first time she'd tried an Aunt Betty's apple pie.

Which had inspired the eventual slogan "As good as Mom makes." Aunt Betty's had seen a nice upturn in sales as a result of that particular piece of creativity.

In the past, Rachel had offered to pay them to be her own private focus group—it would help them financially, and she'd assured them KBC would pick up the tab—but they wouldn't hear of it.

"I'm pitching to a group that's taken over a bunch of private colleges," she said. "They'll be rebranding and relaunching them, along with a finance company offering student loans. But we'll just talk about the academic side today," she added quickly.

She'd learned not to discuss anything financial with her parents, however gently couched. *I don't think this email is actually from the president of Nigeria's largest bank, Dad*. Or, *A hundred percent interest over three months implies a higher investment risk level than you might want to take*.

Instead, she tried to hide enough twenty-dollar bills that they could afford a few small treats. Hoping it was enough to stave off the need to pursue instant riches.

"Sure, we can talk about that," Burton said. "You want to start now?"

"No hurry. I'll stay over, if that's okay."

"Great," her mom said. "When I've finished my coffee I'll wander out to the road—" where the cell phone signal was stronger "—and call LeeAnne. She'll want to see you."

Good thing Rachel had plenty more twenties in her purse. Her younger sister, LeeAnne, was the mother of three-year-old twins. The twins' father had taken off before they were even born, so LeeAnne depended entirely on her parents for backup.

She usually tried to live within a few miles of Nora and Burton. Though as Rachel often pointed out, part-time work that paid a decent wage and allowed her time with the kids was hard enough to find without the added complication of moving so often.

LeeAnne always agreed, but she still packed up and moved each time.

"Seen any good ads lately?" Rachel asked her father.

Her dad rumbled on about a Toyota truck commercial—TV with radio and print backup—that Rachel also considered pretty good. "But my favorite is that Lexus ad with the bridge," Burton said.

Rachel stiffened. "Really? You like that?" It was one of Garrett's campaigns, the first one he'd done at KBC. "You don't think it was bit over-the-top?"

"Over-the-top!" her father scoffed. "It's sheer genius."

Rachel grunted. A sound that reminded her of Garrett, as if she needed to think of him.

"It sure would be convenient if you could win a beer company as a client, hon," her mom joked. "Your dad won a gas grill in a raffle at work, so we thought we'd get some friends over to christen it. A few freebies wouldn't go amiss."

Her parents had been here long enough to make friends to invite over. Could they actually be settling down? Rachel treated it with a healthy dose of skepticism, but, still, it was a tantalizing thought.

Rachel's childhood was a blur of different homes—cheap

apartments, trailers, the occasional small house. Sooner or later, the Fryes had left them all, most with a cheery toot of the horn to the neighbors, a few in the dead of night in the hope the landlord wouldn't chase after them.

It was amazing none of those landlords had tracked them down and taken them to court … but then, her folks were nice people who always meant well. Their creditors always seemed to end up excusing them.

Rachel excused them, too. They were loving parents, and if she'd had to be particularly tenacious to burrow herself into each new school and earn the grades she wanted … well, that was character building. And it wasn't as if Mom and Dad didn't work hard or try to get ahead.

The problem was their method of doing so.

For as long as Rachel could remember, they'd been suckers for the promise of good times around the corner. Over and again, they'd uprooted themselves so Burton could chase after an exciting new job. Or borrowed more than they could afford to invest in a "sure thing."

Just once, they'd had a great return. They'd lent a thousand bucks to a guy who'd patented a new can opener, and got three thousand back. Other than that, to give it the most charitable interpretation, they were the unluckiest investors in the world.

Rachel had long ago agreed to disagree with her parents. She loved them, but she didn't want their lives, and she couldn't share their excitement about the Next Big Thing. And they'd had

enough of what they called her cynicism.

They talked about harmless subjects until LeeAnne and the twins, Kylie and Dannii—named after the Minogue sisters—arrived for lunch. After they'd eaten and cleared away the dishes, the girls stayed at the table with crayons and coloring books, while the adults spread out in the living area, ready to bend their brains to Rachel's latest problem. Her family treated it like a game, and with them it felt like one.

As opposed to feeling as if her life was on the line.

"So let's talk about how people without a college background choose a college for their kids," she said. "I've been trying to remember the discussions we had when I was in high school."

"You girls could have gone to college," Nora said. "You were both bright enough."

"We looked into the whole student loans thing," her father reminded Rachel. "But you said you didn't want to go."

They'd had no way of funding a college education beyond massive loans. And Rachel had seen firsthand the consequences of excessive borrowing; she'd wanted nothing to do with it.

"I'd love it if Kylie and Dannii went to college," LeeAnne said wistfully. "Maybe they'll end up in these schools you're advertising and really make something of themselves."

"They already are something," Nora scolded. "They're the two most adorable girls that ever lived. After you and your sister."

"There is that." LeeAnne smiled.

Threads of ideas began to float in Rachel's mind. She knew

better than to try pinning them down when they were this ephemeral. If she let them float a while, they might coalesce into something solid.

Solid. That's how Tony had described her work. She needed better than solid.

"Takes four years to get a degree," Burton warned LeeAnne.

"I know."

"I guess we have a few years to come into some money," Burton joked.

Oh, boy. Rachel hoped her sister had more of a plan than that. Maybe Rachel could start a college fund for her nieces.

They talked for a while longer. Then LeeAnne glanced at her combined watch and pedometer, which sported the name of a well-known cereal company, one of Rachel's clients. "I'd better go, I'm trying to get the girls into more of a daily routine before they start nursery school. It's time for their nap."

Rachel walked her sister out to her rusting Toyota. They each held one of the twins by the hand.

"So this routine thing is new," Rachel said as she buckled Dannii into her car seat.

"Yeah, I sound almost like you." LeeAnne flashed her a grin and clipped Kylie in.

"Don't knock it—it works." Rachel kissed Dannii, then closed the door, stuffing a twenty into the door pocket as she did so. "So they start nursery school in September?"

"Yep." LeeAnne climbed into the driver's seat and lowered

the passenger window so they could continue talking. “There’s a great school right near us. I hope we’re still in the neighborhood.”

Had her sister ever expressed a desire to remain in one place before?

Rachel leaned in through the window and said casually, “You could stay. If Mom and Dad move, I mean.”

“You know I need to be near them. I couldn’t raise the girls without their moral support, not to mention Mom’s babysitting.” LeeAnne looked in her rearview mirror, back at the trailer.

“Dad’s work is steady, right?” Rachel asked. “There’s no reason to move.”

“Only if something too good to miss comes up somewhere else.” LeeAnne let out a breath that was almost a sigh.

“Maybe if you refused to go with them, Mom and Dad would stay put,” Rachel suggested. LeeAnne had grumbled a bit when they were kids, but she’d never been upset by their constant moves as Rachel had. Maybe, at last, she was developing an interest in stability.

Her sister looked skeptical. “I’m not sure that’s what I want. Moving can be exciting. Though maybe not as often as we do it,” she admitted.

“You should think about staying. For the twins’ sake.” Rachel figured she’d better not push her luck. She stepped back and patted the side of the car. “Off you go, sis.”

She watched until the Toyota turned out onto the road. As she headed back inside, a couple of images that might work for

Brightwater Group flashed in her mind. Rachel picked up the pace and ran to make notes. If she was going to be number one with the client on Monday, there could be No Idea Left Behind.

CHAPTER FIVE

RACHEL TOOK A TRAIN to Princeton, New Jersey, where Brightwater had its headquarters, presumably so some of the luster associated with Princeton University might reflect on its private colleges. Smart strategy.

She arrived in plenty of time for the meeting. Before her colleagues. If punctuality was a deciding factor for the KBC partnership, she would ace the promotion.

Since the morning was sunny but not too hot, she stood outside to wait. Tony and Clive were next to arrive. They'd caught the same train and shared a cab from the station. Coincidence, or clever planning by Clive? She didn't think of him as a schemer—six foot four, slow-moving and good-natured, he was the epitome of a gentle giant.

There was no sign of Garrett. Dared she hope that he'd thrown in the towel?

"Good weekend?" Rachel asked Clive, trying to gauge how much time he'd spent reading up about private colleges.

"I had my in-laws staying," he said. "They're helping us paint the apartment."

"How nice." Didn't sound like he'd been able to work. She checked her watch … oops, she wasn't supposed to be doing that so often. Three minutes past nine. Garrett couldn't be coming; even he wouldn't dare to be late today. "Shall we go in?" she said

cheerfully.

Tony scanned the parking lot. “Any idea how Garrett’s getting here?”

He’d barely finished speaking when a black BMW M5 roared into the lot.

“I think,” Rachel said, “he’s driving.”

Garrett parked right in front of them, in a space that wasn’t strictly a space. He got out of the car empty-handed. No briefcase. No notepad.

Rachel felt suddenly weighed down by her tools of the trade. Un-nimble. *At least I was here on time*. She waited for him to apologize for keeping them waiting.

“Hi,” he said to Tony.

Tony nodded and glanced at his watch.

“Is that peanut butter on your tie?” Garrett asked Clive.

“Probably,” Clive said equably.

Garrett’s gaze skimmed over Rachel’s black silk blouse and dropped to the hem of the *Pick me, I’m the best* cerise skirt that ended just above her knees.

“Love the pink, Rach,” he said, his voice deepening. “Your legs aren’t bad, either.”

Good grief, the guy had a career death wish!

That was fine by Rachel. Tony opened his mouth to object to Garrett’s comment, but she held up a hand to tell him she could deal with it.

“Cerise,” she corrected Garrett coolly. “And it’s Rachel. I

don't expect my legs to affect the outcome of this meeting."

How pathetic did he think she was, to fall for another attempt to disconcert her?

He peered closer. "Don't underestimate yourself—they're damn good."

"That's enough, Garrett," Tony snapped.

Garrett shrugged. A twinge of envy surprised Rachel. When she'd let herself think about it, KBC's decision to fire two creative directors filled her with fear and anger. Consequently, she was on her best behavior. Garrett's don't-give-a-damn attitude spoke of a courage she didn't have.

In their meeting, Mark Van de Kamp, Brightwater's marketing director, seemed excited about the level of creative talent he was being offered. He gave them a more in-depth briefing about the new colleges—actually a bunch of existing colleges the group had acquired—and their target market. Rachel managed to slip in a couple of what she considered insightful comments.

"Any questions?" Mark asked at the conclusion of his presentation.

Clive jumped in, showing a good grasp of the issues. Some of them, at least.

Rachel stepped up to the plate with one he'd missed. "Mark, there's been a suggestion that companies like Brightwater exploit the low-income families they claim to serve, encouraging them to take out loans they can't afford to pay back. How worried are

you that what you're doing will be seen in that light?" With her own nieces in mind, she'd spent half of Sunday researching issues surrounding low-income families and college fees.

Garrett looked surprised—whether at the information or the fact she'd come up with such an unexpected question, she wasn't sure. Tony seemed intrigued. All in all, Rachel felt as if she'd made a strong attempt to step outside the box.

"Good question." Mark smiled at her. "Those other organizations have typically offered punitive loan conditions and poor academic quality. Our loan rates will be competitive, and we're currently lining up endorsements by Action Against Poverty and the NAACP in support of the quality of our programs."

"Sounds good." Rachel made some notes on her legal pad.

Logic dictated it was Garrett's turn to ask the next question.

She set down her pen so she could observe The Shark in action.

For long seconds silence reigned.

"So tell me, Mark," Garrett said, "If Brightwater was a fruit, what fruit would it be?"

What?

Clive glanced down at the peanut-butter stain on his tie, so Rachel couldn't read his expression. Tony froze in his seat. Garrett was straight-faced, totally relaxed.

"Hmm." Mark propped his chin on his hand. "That's very interesting, Garrett, very interesting indeed."

It's a crock! He's kidding!

Both Tony and Clive took their cue from the client, and nodded.

Excuse me? Am I the only rational person in this room?

Garrett's glance flicked toward her, as if he could read her thoughts. She couldn't suppress an eye roll. His eyebrows rose in spurious inquiry.

"I think I'd have to say … a melon," Mark said.

"Cantaloupe or honeydew?" Garrett shot back.

Oh, puh-lease.

"Cantaloupe, definitely."

"I see," Garrett said. "Thanks, Mark, that's useful." He smiled at Van de Kamp, and it was such a rare thing, it was as if the sun had come out from a cloud. Rachel could practically see the man basking in its warmth.

GARRETT OFFERED THEM ALL a ride back to the office. While Tony and Clive were signing out at the reception desk, Rachel caught up with him on his way to the parking lot.

"What was that about?" she demanded.

"What?" He sped up, forcing her to almost jog.

"Melons," she said.

He didn't slow, but his gaze flicked down over her fitted blouse. "No comment, though I'm sure they're very nice. I'm more of a leg man."

She sputtered a laugh … and realized he was paying her legs some considerable attention. "Garrett, be serious. You can't tell

me that's how you normally take a brief."

"Oh, dear, have you been doing it wrong all this time?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, I have not. But I don't get what you —" She stopped. "You're quitting. Aren't you?"

He walked faster. "What do you mean?"

"Those comments, way too outrageous even for you. You're leaving KBC." She was unable to contain a triumphant grin as she kept pace.

"No, I'm not," he said, annoyed. Totally unconvincing.

"Hey," she said, "I don't blame you. You could get any job you want. Why would you hang around here?"

They'd reached his BMW. Rachel set her overprepared, overloaded briefcase on the pavement.

He stared down at her, her high heels making no impression against his height. "Maybe you're right."

Before she could encourage him further, Tony and Clive joined them. Garrett pressed the remote unlock on his key chain.

Rachel clambered into the back of the M5, her shorter stature demanding that she cede the more spacious front seat to Clive.

"Nice car," Tony said as he settled in next to her.

"So, Garrett," Rachel said, as he reversed out of his space, "if this car was a fruit, what fruit would it be?"

His gaze met hers in the rearview mirror. "A banana, of course."

"Useful insight," she said. "Thanks."

His dark eyes gleamed.

“You do that fruit thing, too?” Tony asked. “What the hell is that about?”

No one does the fruit thing. It’s Garrett’s idea of a joke. “I used to do it,” she said. “It’s a bit passé.”

A snort from the driver as he turned out of the parking lot onto Brunswick Pike.

“Guys, I want to give you some feedback on today’s meeting,” Tony said.

He was certainly taking this reality TV–style evaluation to extremes.

“Rachel, Clive, you were both great.”

“Thanks, Tony,” she murmured. *I guess that means Garrett goes home*.

“Garrett, you engaged well with the client. I admit, I don’t get the fruit thing, but it certainly snagged Van de Kamp’s interest. If you can deliver on that stuff, I’m all in favor.”

“I’ll deliver,” Garrett said.

Huh? Shouldn’t he be quitting right about now? What happened to *Maybe you’re right?* Rachel tried to catch his glance in the mirror, but he wasn’t looking.

“But you were late arriving,” Tony said, “which made us all late for the meeting. And your comment about Rachel’s appearance was out of line.”

“It was a joke, Tony,” Garrett said. “Rachel knew that.”

It wasn’t a joke, it was a sabotage attempt mixed up with Garrett’s professional suicide.

“Did you take it as a joke, Rachel?” Tony asked.

Industry old-timers like Tony were known to suffer the odd lapse in judgment themselves; Rachel figured he was following up more because he had responsibilities under the New York City Human Rights Law than out of genuine disapproval.

She opened her mouth to say, *Of course, no problem*. Because she was a team player, and this wasn’t about her, and anyway, she knew Garrett was playing some game of his own.

But what game was that, exactly? She needed him to quit.

Inspiration struck, inspiration she could only credit to the presence of the man who’d accused her of being unable to seize the moment.

“Actually, Tony, I was uncomfortable,” she said. She stifled a twinge of guilt at the lie. Garrett was the guy who’d told Piers she was trading sex for no breakup, who’d lied about his mother’s death for competitive advantage. If he needed a push to leave, she was happy to help. Who said she couldn’t think on her feet! Feet that happened to be attached to “damn good” legs.

“What the hell?” Garrett’s outraged expression showed in the mirror.

Even Tony looked taken aback. It wasn’t as if she was a powerless junior; he knew she relished fighting her own battles.

“I’m not saying I feel sexually harassed,” Rachel assured her boss. “Not exactly.”

“Good, good,” Tony sputtered. “Not that I’m trying to discourage you from making a complaint if that’s what you

want," he added, in a confused but valiant attempt at political correctness.

"For Pete's sake!" Garrett wrenched the steering wheel to the right as he twisted to glare at Rachel. Clive murmured a protest. Garrett cursed and returned his focus to the road.

"Oh, no, definitely not," Rachel assured her boss. "I think it's just that Garrett has trouble relating to women. Part of his team skills problem."

"I don't have trouble with women," Garrett said ominously.

"Just last week Natasha was in the washroom in tears after Garrett told her off." Rachel didn't mention Natasha had stuck her mascara wand in her eye at the same time as she mentioned her run-in with Garrett. She was pleasantly surprised how easy it was to be devious when you had the right inspiration.

Garrett said, "Natasha left the office to check on her boyfriend's broken foot—"

"Torn Achilles tendon," Rachel interrupted.

"—and completely forgot about the Sheraton pitch," Garrett growled.

"On Friday, after our breakfast, Garrett touched Julie on the shoulder," she reported to Tony. "I could see she was confused about what it meant."

"You're evil," Garrett said conversationally.

Rachel picked up on the underlying anger and felt almost sorry for him. But she'd done that once before, in the elevator, and look how he'd played her. And the catch-phrase of his … *Do it on*

your terms … No way would he consent to what she was about to suggest. He'd be out the door, voluntarily, before she could say *chicken*.

She smiled beatifically at Tony. "So I'm offering to educate Garrett."

"You what?" Garrett snarled.

"I'm willing to make time to get involved with Garrett's team," she said. "To monitor his interactions, particularly with female staff, and advise him how to handle situations better."

"She's kidding," Garrett said.

Rachel rather liked that edge of desperation. She knew Garrett would hasten his inevitable departure, rather than have her overseeing him. She'd observed his natural abhorrence for authority. *Quit, Garrett, quit*.

"You'll recall I scored a clean-sweep perfect ten in my team's appraisals of my management skills," she reminded Tony.

"So you did," he said. "First time anyone's done that. You're a good girl, Rachel. Uh, I mean, a smart woman. But do you have time to help Garrett?"

"Tony!" Garrett near shouted.

"I'll make time," she said generously. "Not for my sake, but for women everywhere." For a moment, she worried she'd overdone it; in the front seat, Clive's enormous shoulders shook.

But Tony appeared to be in the thrall of an image of multiple harassment suits being filed against KBC.

"Thanks, Rachel," he said. "That'd be great. You should start

right away."

"My pleasure," she said, and meant it.

Quit, you ill-mannered, manipulative, *motherless* Shark!

CHAPTER SIX

GARRETT TOOK THE STAIRS to his condo two at a time, powered by frustration and a buzz of adrenaline that caught him by surprise.

Rachel.

The woman he knew to be as predictable as yesterday's weather had picked up on his intention to quit KBC, then gone all out to push him into action because it was what *she* wanted.

He hadn't known she had it in her.

Garrett rounded the second-floor landing and kept going. Sure, it had taken Rachel until they were leaving Brightwater to click that his remarks were the screw-you salute of someone who didn't plan to stick around. Even if they were true … particularly the one about her legs, which he'd never noticed before were sensational. But neither Tony nor Clive had worked out where he was coming from. They'd assumed Garrett was being his usual self, the guy who could never be accused of toeing the party line.

As he passed the black-painted number three on the third-floor landing, he wondered how he'd given himself away to Rachel. Quick thinking on her part, to come up with that sexual harassment stuff in an attempt to force his hand. She was a whole lot more devious than he'd given her credit for. Tony couldn't see she was playing games, it seemed. Eight years of Goody Two-shoes had finally paid off.

Too bad her attempt to manipulate Garrett had triggered his natural resistance. Instead of resigning when they got back to the city, he'd sat in his office mulling over what he wanted to do. To his annoyance, he'd failed to reach a decision.

It was this time of year, that was all. Made it hard for him to *Let it go*. Tomorrow. He'd quit tomorrow.

Garrett fished his keys from his pocket as he pulled open the door to the fourth floor.

Right away, he saw the woman.

At least, he figured it was a woman, going by the ponytail of brown hair.

She sat huddled on the floor next to his door, a small backpack beside her, her head buried in her arms on jeans-clad knees. A light-colored trench coat pooled around her. There were only two condos per floor; she must be a friend of his neighbor's, must have turned the wrong way out of the elevator.

"Miss?" he said.

No reply. He hoped she wasn't drunk, or ill. Or if she was, he hoped his neighbor was home.

He touched her shoulder. "Excuse me, miss?"

She jolted awake with a cry of alarm and lifted her face.

Not a miss. A Mrs.

Mrs. Stephanie Calder.

"What are you doing here?" Garrett asked. Shouldn't she be whipping up a pot roast in New London?

"Garrett—damn, I fell asleep." She rubbed her eyes, then

blinked up at him. “What time is it?”

“Why don’t you check your watch?” Yeah, it was churlish, but he’d decided years ago never to give his father’s wife anything.

She consulted the slim white-gold Piaget on her wrist. “Nine,” she muttered. “Do you always work so late?”

“Is Dad all right?” He didn’t think he’d ever seen Stephanie in jeans outside the house before. And the ponytail was positively sloppy compared with her usual elegant grooming.

“Your father’s your father,” she said, her voice clipped. “I gather your birthday celebration didn’t go too well last week?”

Celebration wasn’t the word he’d have chosen. Garrett shrugged.

She tsked. “Did your father tell you … anything?”

Crap, his dad *was* sick. “He mentioned something about me getting a real job.” Garrett feigned casualness.

She groaned under her breath and rubbed her eyes again. Her makeup was smudged; she looked haggard. She stuck out a hand. “Help me up?” Then, before he could refuse, she dropped her hand again. “Don’t worry, I’ll manage.”

Standing proved a strangely awkward process. She rolled onto all fours then pushed herself off the thick carpet designed to cushion the tread of noisy neighbors.

When she was finally upright, the floor seemed to shift beneath Garrett, forcing him to put a hand to the wall.

“You’ve been overdoing the pizza,” he said, eyeing Stephanie’s enormous, round belly.

“The baby’s due in June.” She planted her fists on her hips, as if defying him to disapprove. The movement thrust her belly out even farther. “I’m seven months along. We would have told you sooner, except we haven’t seen you since Christmas—” he’d spent the holiday with them only because his brother had been home on leave from his naval posting “—and we didn’t know I was pregnant then.”

“And Dad was meant to tell me about this last week.”

“Among other things.” She bent at the knees to scoop up her little backpack. “Do we have to do this in the hallway?”

“Where’s Dad?” Garrett glanced around.

Stephanie slung the pack over one shoulder. “I left him.”

Once again, Garrett’s world tipped on its axis. “You mean, left him out in the car, right?” But he hadn’t seen a Hummer parked in the street.

“I mean, left our marriage.” She plucked the key from his suddenly nerveless fingers. “Let’s go inside.”

In the condo, Garrett used the time spent disarming the burglar alarm and turning on lights to try to get his head around this bizarre new development. Nope, he couldn’t do it. “Does Lucas know about the baby?”

“Of course.” Stephanie set her pack down next to the sofa and sat. “I wrote to him a few months back.”

Garrett wondered what his brother had made of the news. He’d tried to convince Lucas that Stephanie was the enemy, back when their dad had married her, but Lucas had been twelve years

old and he'd wanted a mother. He hadn't seen the wrongness of their dad marrying again so quickly after Mom died, without consulting them, without listening to Garrett's protests. The wrongness of Dwight expecting them to welcome Stephanie and her clumsy attempts at stepmotherhood.

"Aren't you too old to be doing this?" He waved at her stomach without looking. "Is it IVF?" He couldn't imagine his dad submitting to the invasive process.

"I just turned forty-five—it's within the bounds of possibility." She cupped her hands over her stomach protectively. "Though it was certainly unexpected. Your father and I tried for a long time to have a baby. When this happened … the symptoms … I thought I was menopausal."

Too much information.

Garrett headed to the kitchen area. "Coffee?" he said over his shoulder.

"Do you have decaf?"

"No."

She sighed. "Okay, but make it a weak one. You're supposed to cut back on caffeine in pregnancy—though since it took me four months to figure out I was pregnant that didn't quite happen."

Away from that telltale stomach, Garrett pulled his thoughts into order. Okay, Stephanie was pregnant, a little fact that everyone except Garrett had known. Due in June. At which point he would have a half brother or sister.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” he called.

“I don’t know.” Stephanie spoke from the other side of the island, making him jump. “I want it to be a surprise—your father wanted to know but it turns out the mother’s wishes prevail in this sort of thing.”

She sounded almost amused. Probably hadn’t been too many times her wishes had prevailed since she’d married Admiral Dwight Calder. Wait a minute …

“Did you say you *left* my father?” How he could have lost sight of that detail?

“That’s right.” She eyed the amount of coffee he was scooping into the press with misgiving.

“Is he upset about the baby? I would have thought he’d be delighted to have another chance at a son he could mold in his own image.”

“Dwight would never expect this baby to replace you,” she said. “Or Lucas.”

Mention of his brother was an obvious afterthought, presumably to make Garrett feel less left out of his father’s affections.

“I don’t care if it does, if it takes the pressure off me.”

The kettle began to whistle. Garrett poured water into the press.

“I asked Dwight to come see you because I don’t want him making the same mistakes with this baby that he made with you,” Stephanie said.

Garrett's head jerked up; boiling water sloshed over the side of the press and onto his thumb.

He cursed and turned on the faucet. He stuck his thumb beneath the running water. Stephanie moved into the kitchen and took over the job of putting the lid on the press. She was so big with that—that thing in her stomach, Garrett felt as if he couldn't get away from her.

"So now you're concerned about me and Dad?" he asked. "Shouldn't you have thought of that, say, fifteen years ago, and not married him two minutes after my mom died?"

She ignored his dig. "Dwight's been supportive of this baby in the obvious ways…."

"But not emotionally," Garrett said.

She nodded. "I told him if he can't prove to me he can be a loving father, I don't want him in our child's life."

"He's a loving father to Lucas." Garrett still couldn't figure out what the heck was going on, why Stephanie was really here.

"We both know that's because Lucas is in the navy and hasn't yet needed to butt heads with your dad. Dwight needs to open his heart to this baby no matter what choices it makes." She pushed the plunger down on the press. "Cups?"

With his unscalded hand, Garrett indicated a cupboard to her left.

Stephanie poured coffee into one mug. She glanced from the press to the other mug, bemused.

"Fill yours halfway, then top it up with water," Garrett

instructed.

She shook her head, as if to clear it, and laughed. “Sorry, I struggle with the most basic decisions these days. Blame the hormones.”

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