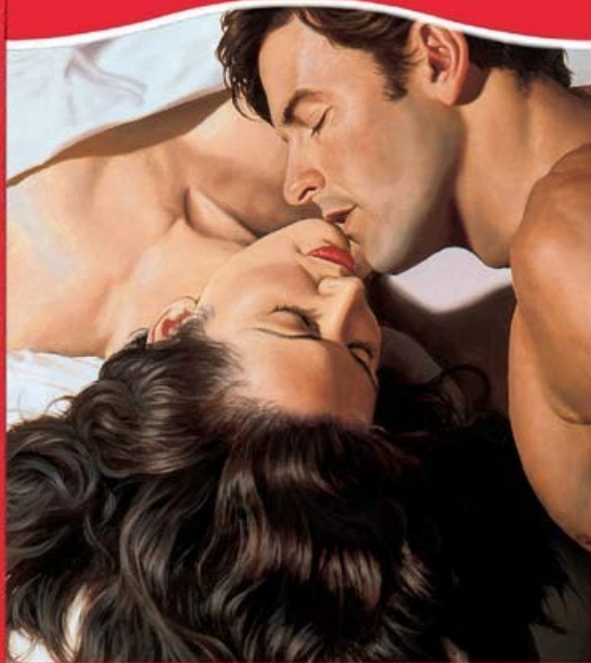


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Who's The Boss?

Barbara Boswell



Vintage 90s

Barbara Boswell

Who's The Boss?

Аннотация

MR. MAY Man: Cade Austin, CEO of BrenCO Mission: To lure pretty Kylie Brennan out of the boardroom and into the bedroom! Mistake: Letting her know his not-so-honorable intentions... Cade didn't need a meddling woman in his life! So when the late owner of BrenCo left him 49% of the company - and Kylie the other 51% - Cade decided he would buy her out, then get her way out of town. But when she came strolling into the office - all lush curves and long legs - Cade knew that this was one woman he wasn't going to let out of his sight for long! MAN OF THE MONTH: Could he talk his business partner into becoming his marriage partner?

[Cade Clenched His Jaw As Kylie Approached Him. She Was Twenty-Seven Years Old And She Was His Boss!](#) [Letter to Reader](#) [Title Page](#) [About the Author](#) [Chapter One](#) [Chapter Two](#) [Chapter Three](#) [Chapter Four](#) [Chapter Five](#) [Chapter Six](#) [Chapter Seven](#) [Chapter Eight](#) [Chapter Nine](#) [Chapter Ten](#) [Copyright](#)

Cade Clenched His Jaw As Kylie Approached Him. She Was Twenty-Seven Years Old And She Was His Boss!

The situation was ridiculous, but true. And his boss was a knockout. Kylie Brennan was blessed with natural beauty. She appeared both sultry and sweet; wholesome yet enticingly sexy. All in all, a fascinating contrast that evoked an immediate and tangible response from Cade.

He was appalled at his reaction! The last thing he needed was to be turned on by this woman, who could single-handedly wreck his future. Yet here he stood, conjuring up what was definitely a sexual fantasy.

And during office hours, yet!

Dear Reader,

There's something for everyone this month! Brides, babies and cowboys...but also humor, sensuality...and delicious love stories (some without a baby in sight!).

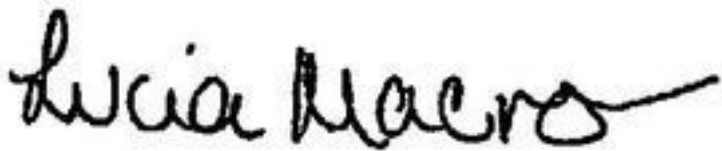
There's nothing as wonderful as a new book from Barbara Boswell, and this month we have a MAN OF THE MONTH written by this talented author. Who's the Boss? is a very sexy, delightfully funny love story. As always, Barbara not only creates a masterful hero and smart-as-a-whip heroine, she also makes

her secondary characters come alive!

When a pregnant woman gets stuck in a traffic jam she does the only thing she can do—talks a handsome hunk into giving her a ride to the hospital on his motorcycle in Leanne Banks's latest, *The Troublemaker Bride*.

Have you ever wanted to marry a millionaire? Well, heroine Irish Ellison plans on finding a man with money in *One Ticket to Texas* by Jan Hudson. A single mom-to-be gets a new life in Paula Detmer Riggs's emotional and heartwarming *Daddy by Accident*. And a woman with a "bad reputation" finds unexpected romance in Barbara McMahon's *Boss Lady* and *the Hired Hand*.

Going to your high-school reunion is bad enough. But what if you were voted "Most likely to succeed"...but your success at love has been fleeting? Well, that's just what happens in Susan Connell's *How To Succeed at Love*. So read...and enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucia Macro". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending from the end of the name.

Lucia Macro

Senior Editor

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Who's The Boss?

Barbara Boswell



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BARBARA BOSWELL loves writing about families. “I guess family has been a big influence on my writing,” she says. “I particularly enjoy writing about how my characters’ family relationships affect them”

When Barbara isn’t writing and reading, she’s spending time with her own family—her husband, three daughters and three cats, whom she concedes are the true bosses of their home! She has lived in Europe, but now makes her home in Pennsylvania. She collects miniatures and holiday ornaments, tries to avoid exercise and has somehow found the time to write over twenty category romances.

One

Though he knew they were first cousins and shared the Brennan gene pool, Cade Austin had never seen such a dissimilar pair. From his vantage point at the end of the corridor, he watched Kylie Brennan and her younger cousin Bndget walking toward him. Conversation between the cousins appeared

minimal and a bit strained.

He saw Kylie slant a covert glance at Bridget, and a slight smile tilted the corners of Cade's mouth. He was willing to bet his fifteen percent stock ownership in BrenCo that Kylie had never worn a tight, tiny, belly-button-exposing, black ribbed T-shirt, like the one Bridget was wearing now. Bridget had matched it with a brilliant lime-colored faux leather skirt that scarcely covered her behind, black stockings and little girl style shoes with thick black straps and jarring lug soles. Bridget was one of BrenCo's receptionists, but rarely dressed like one. Cade had seen movie hookers whose outfits were more conservative than some of Bridget's.

Kylie's light gray suit, white silk blouse and traditional pumps looked professional and classy. She dressed like the attorney Cade knew she was.

However, as president, Cade enforced no company dress code, though he was somewhat relieved that the rest of the staff chose more traditional attire for the workplace. Employees could wear whatever they liked at BrenCo as long as they showed up on time and got the job done. Which Bridget did. She was both reliable and competent. The old "never judge a book by its cover" adage definitely applied to Bridget Brennan.

Cade reminded himself not to make that mistake with her cousin Kylie, either. She may or may not be what she seemed; he needed time for a thorough assessment.

His eyes focused more intently on her. The last time he'd

seen Kylie Brennan had also been the first time, exactly fourteen months ago at her uncle Gene's funeral, right here in Port McClain, Ohio. She had flown in shortly before the service and been unable to stay for the post-funeral festivities. Her parents explained she was in the middle of a trial and had only that day off before court resumed.

The other Brennans hadn't been pleased by Kylie's abrupt arrival and departure. "She inherits controlling interest in the company from Gene and she can't even stick around long enough to eat some corned beef and cabbage at his wake?" complained Lauretta Brennan.

"Kylie must have been Uncle Gene's favorite, and I don't understand why." Ian Brennan sulked. "She didn't grow up in Port McClain, and she saw the old man only once a year at most."

"Ever hear the one about familiarity and contempt? Mystery solved, Ian," replied his cousin Bridget.

Ian had shot her a killing glance, the one he reserved for most of his relatives.

Cade smiled at the memory. Twenty-two-year-old Bridget often said what he was thinking himself but was too polite to share. At least some of the time he was too polite. Other times he, too, just said what he thought, a trait that hadn't endeared him to most Brennans.

He didn't care because he'd had the approval, confidence and full backing of the one Brennan who counted, Gene Brennan. Gene, the man who had hired him eight years ago and eventually

made him president of BrenCo, who had given him the job opportunity of a lifetime and all the challenges and privileges that went with it.

Until fourteen months ago, he'd had only to answer to Gene Brennan, but the older man's sudden death had changed everything. Gene had left fifty-one percent of BrenCo stock—controlling interest—to his niece Kylie, the daughter of his favorite brother Wayne. Since Cade already owned fifteen percent due to the generous stock options afforded him as CEO of BrenCo, the remaining thirty-four percent of the company's stock had been equally divided between Gene's two younger brothers, Artie and Guy, lifelong residents of Port McClain. Gene's house and personal effects had been willed to brother Wayne, a retired navy captain.

The local Brennans—Artie and his ex-wife Bobbie and their kids Brenda, Brent and Bridget; Guy and his wife Lauretta and their kids Ian, Todd and Polly—hadn't been shy about vocalizing their displeasure with the terms of the will. It was one of the very few things they all agreed upon.

The out-of-town Brennans—Wayne, wife Connie, son Devlin and daughter Kylie—remained apart from the grouching and the grumbling, separated from the rest of the clan by more than mere geographical distance. Of course, one could argue that branch of the family had done very well by Gene Brennan's last will and testament. The other Brennans often argued that point.

For the past fourteen months, Cade had continued to run

BrenCo as before, the only difference being the absence of Gene Brennan himself. Cade sometimes wondered if he were the only one to miss the man. Certainly, Gene's relatives here in Port McClain didn't even pretend to. As for his niece heiress, financial statements were regularly sent to Kylie Brennan at her address in Philadelphia along with Cade's written offers to discuss company business with her at any time, but she'd displayed no interest in either his offer or the business.

Until two weeks ago. Two weeks ago, Cade had received a note from Kylie Brennan stating her intent to come to Port McClain. She would be staying in her uncle Gene's house for the duration of her visit, but she hadn't specified why she was coming or how long she intended to stay. That bothered Cade. An open-ended visit? He didn't like the sound of it.

Even more ominous was Artie Brennan's phone call, announcing that he and Guy had already talked with Kylie about the possibility of selling the company. "Kylie is the majority stockholder and that makes her the boss, your boss, Cade." Artie had reminded him with gleeful malice. "If she votes to sell BrenCo, it gets solid."

His boss. Cade clenched his jaw as his boss approached him. She was twenty-seven years old and she was his boss! The situation was ridiculous, it was unthinkable, untenable. But true.

Gene, how could you do this to me? Cade's eyes flicked heavenward as he silently invoked his departed mentor. Of course, Gene's death at sixty-two had been completely

unexpected. Given his parents' longevity—Ma and Pa Brennan had lived well into their eighties—Gene had probably intended to alter his will at some later date, after Cade had bought enough stock to own controlling interest in BrenCo as planned.

But time had run out and they were stuck with the one and only will he'd written, naming Kylie Marie Brennan his major heir. Making her Cade Austin's boss.

"Hey, Cade!" Bridget greeted the company president the same way she greeted her peers at Club Reek, her favorite night spot along the banks of McClain Creek.

"Hey, Bridget," he replied gamely. He saw the glimmer of humor in Kylie's eyes, saw the sudden smile cross her face. Cade inhaled sharply.

Kylie Brennan was blessed with natural beauty: high cheekbones, wide-set china blue eyes, and a heart-shaped face framed by her thick, dark slightly-below-the-chin-length bob. But that smile of hers transformed her classic good looks into something more compelling, more intriguing. She had a wide, generous mouth and a dimple on her left cheek, and when she smiled she appeared both sultry and sweet, wholesome yet enticingly sexy. All in all, a fascinating contrast that evoked an immediate and tangible response from Cade.

He felt the stirrings deep in his groin and was appalled. The woman was his boss! The last thing he—or BrenCo—needed was for him to be turned on by this alluring young woman who had the power to sell the company out from under him. Who

could single-handedly wreck his future plans and take BrenCo from him with one crucial decision. Sell.

Damn, why did she have to be so attractive? He studied her soft full lips and imagined...

"So I guess you two know each other, huh?" Bridget's voice jerked him from the erotic fantasy he'd been drifting into.

Cade was grateful for the reality check. What was happening to him? He never daydreamed while he was working, not unless the subject had to do with environmental engineering, and then it was called brainstorming. Nor was he prone to sexual fantasizing in his spare time; he'd outgrown that puerile pastime long ago. Yet here he stood, conjuring up what was definitely a sexual fantasy. During office hours. Starring his could-be-trouble beautiful young boss! Was he losing his mind?

"Cade Austin," he said, briskly extending his hand to Kylie. Hopefully, his inner turmoil wasn't evident. "We haven't been formally introduced but I saw you at Gene's funeral."

"Kylie Brennan." She put her hand in Cade's and was immediately struck by the size of it. His fingers were long and strong and closed around hers. "I'm sorry I haven't kept in touch. I received all your company updates but I've been very busy..." Her voice trailed off.

It was a lame excuse and she knew it. Cade Austin was a busy man, but he had taken the time and effort to send those business communiqués to her. Reflexively, she lifted her eyes to his. Their gazes met and he raised his dark brows in a gesture she couldn't

quite interpret. Was he merely acknowledging her explanation? Or silently berating or mocking her for it? She couldn't tell.

And then it occurred to her that he was still holding her hand, that their handshake had lasted longer than the conventional introductory shake, which elevated it to an altogether different realm. When she felt his thumb glide lazily over her knuckles, she felt a sharp thrust in her abdomen, stunning and swift, as if she'd been kicked. Except the sensations jolting through her were pleasurable not painful. Alarmingly pleasurable.

Kylie felt a hot flush of color spread upward, heating a path from her belly to her suddenly very pink cheeks. She quickly removed her hand from his.

What on earth was the matter with her? she wondered, a little frantically. She was twenty-seven years old, not a schoolgirl who hadn't yet tamed the swirling rush of hormones in her system. Yet she was reacting to Cade with a wild surge of awareness, appallingly similar to her teenage crushes on certain cute boys all those years ago.

There was nothing cute or boyish about Cade Austin, far from it. He was thirty-five years old and six feet four inches of solid masculinity, with a muscular frame and well-defined features. Kylie's gaze took in his strong jaw and square chin, the sharp blade of a nose and firm, hard mouth.

She was standing close enough to see that his eyes were hazel, flecked with green, and watched her with an alert, assessing intelligence. What if he knew the turmoil he was so effortlessly

evoking within her? The possibility made her cringe.

Her mouth felt dry, and Kylie quickly flicked the tip of her tongue over her lips. She felt Cade's eyes follow the small movement. Kylie took a step backward, then another. Hopefully, putting some physical distance between them would enable her to put an end to her distraction and his domination.

And he was dominating her, with his greater height and strength and sheer virility. Kylie understood body language; she'd made good use of it in court but never before had she been so personally affected by it.

"What brings you to Port McClain at this particular time, Miss Brennan?" Cade asked, his tone impeccably polite.

And yet...Kylie swore she heard a mocking note in his tone, subtle enough to be indiscernible if one wasn't paying close attention. She met Cade's eyes again and set her mouth in a determined line. She always paid attention.

"I wanted to visit my relatives and to be brought up-to-date on BrenCo. This month seemed like the perfect time to come here to—"

"The perfect time to come here," Cade echoed. There was no mistaking the taunt in his tone this time. "Yeah, sure. March in Ohio is a veritable paradise, especially when a place is as close to Lake Erie as Port McClain. We've got the notorious take-effect winds, temperature and record snowfalls. Port McClam, the perfect place, the perfect time. Wonder if the Chamber of Commerce could pitch the town as the newest winter vacation

destination?”

“We get enough snow in Port McClain to be a ski resort,” Bridget stated. “Except it’s totally flat here. We don’t even have a hill. But it would be cool to have a ski lodge anyway, wouldn’t it, Cade?” She completely ignored Kylie.

“What’s the point of a ski lodge without any skring?” Cade was clearly not taken with Bridget’s idea.

“It could be like a Club Reek with a fireplace,” Bridget explained. “Sort of an antiski lodge.”

“An antiski lodge, hmm?” Cade echoed, smiling.

Or was he grimacing? Kylie found it difficult to differentiate. “Let me rephrase from a perfect time to visit to a convenient time to visit,” she suggested quickly, before Bridget went off on another tangent.

“And has your visit been convenient so far?” Cade asked.

He sounded so unctuously solicitous that Kylie guessed he was aware that so far her visit had been anything but convenient. “No,” she admitted grimly. “No, it hasn’t.”

“You arrived in Port McClain last night, I believe? And planned to stay in Gene’s house,” Cade prompted.

“Uncle Gene’s house is currently uninhabitable.” Kylie was sure she wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know. “I’d written to both Uncle Guy and Uncle Artie two weeks ago and asked them to have the electricity, water, gas and phone service turned on in the house and to hire a cleaning service to prepare the place for occupancy.”

“Let me guess, nothing had been done,” Cade surmised. “Your first mistake was asking both Artie and Guy, and then letting them know you’d asked them both. You unwittingly set up a Brennan double play. Artie and Guy could each claim that he thought the other was taking care of the house, while each did nothing. Meanwhile, both your uncles could enjoy a hearty laugh imagining you showing up at Gene’s place, which has been vacant since his funeral.”

Kylie thought of her phone calls last night to her two uncles who had each claimed he thought the other was handling her requests. It had seemed a logical, albeit annoying, slipup. But to think it was premeditated, that they’d relished the idea of her standing in the creepily dark, cold, damp and musty old house...

“That’s an awful thing to say,” Kylie scolded, rejecting his premise.

She glanced at Bridget, expecting her to second the objection. After all, Cade had insulted her father and their mutual uncle Guy.

Bridget merely shrugged. “So where’d you stay last night? Not at Uncle Gene’s Haunted Mansion, I’m sure.”

“I stayed at the Port McClain Hotel.”

Cade and Bridget looked at each other and laughed.

“That place has all the ambience of the House of Usher. And you must’ve been one of the few guests who rented a room for the night, instead of by the hour.” Cade’s eyes gleamed. “You’d have done better to stay at one of the motels off the interstate exit.”

Kylie thought of the sounds she'd heard last night in the room above her, the steady traffic through the halls. Cade's remarks explained a lot. She shuddered. "When I talked to Aunt Lauretta last night and asked her where to stay, she said the Port McClain Hotel."

"Wow! She deliberately sent you there?" Bridget laughed harder. "Chalk one up for Aunt Lauretta."

"You should have contacted me about the house," said Cade. "I would've taken care of all the arrangements and the place would have been ready for you. I suggest that you rely upon me, not the Brennans, while you're here in Port McClain. Now, would you like me to have my secretary Donna make those calls to the utilities and a cleaning service for you?"

"I've already done all that from my hotel room this morning." Kylie was irked by his condescending, paternalistic attitude. Did he think she was incapable of making a few phone calls? "And I intend to rely on myself while I'm here in Port McClain," she added coolly.

"Is it true you lost your job, Kylie?" Bridget suddenly interjected. "That's what my brother, Brent, heard from my dad who heard it from Uncle Guy. They all think you'll be glad to sell the company 'cause if you're out of work, you'll need money, right? That's what they're hoping for. They want to sell real bad and get big bucks for their shares. Aunt Lauretta and Ian are really pushing for it, too, and—"

"Bridget, this is company time and you're wasting it." Cade

interrupted her, his tone stern, all signs of friendliness gone. “Get back to work right now.”

Bridget smoothed her hands over her short, spiky black hair. “I didn’t say anything that everybody doesn’t already know,” she said defensively. “Why would Kylie be here if she didn’t want to —”

“Bridget, if you’re not gone by the time I count to three, your pay will be docked, one hour for each number I reach.” Cade’s voice was calm but steely enough to send Bridget heading down the corridor before he even uttered “one.”

Kylie shifted uncomfortably. “I’ve never found bullying to be an effective tactic to use in dealing with—”

“You’ve obviously never had to deal with your relatives. I’ve found it effective in dealing with some Brennans, at times the only effective method of dealing with them.” He folded his arms in front of his chest and stared down at her.

It was as if he were looming over her, a most unfamiliar sensation. Kylie felt her stomach tighten. At five foot eight, she wasn’t used to feeling small and powerless in a man’s presence, but Cade Austin’s big muscular frame seemed to dwarf her. It was a disconcerting sensation. No wonder Bridget had taken off. At a petite five-two, she was like a mouse facing a lion.

Cade’s face was hard and still, and his hazel eyes watched Kylie with the same concentration said lion might focus on his intended prey. She swallowed and willed herself to maintain her composure. She was no scurrying little mouse.

“I know what you’re doing and it’s not going to work,” she said, summoning up the necessary bravado. A useful trick of the legal trade. How many times had she faked a bold confidence she was far from feeling in the courtroom?

“What am I trying to do, Kylie?”

It didn’t escape her notice that he’d used her first name for the first time. Big deal. Everybody called everybody by their first names these days; formality had gone the way of the TV antenna. So why did Cade’s use of her given name seem to create an aura of intimacy between them?

“You’re trying to physically intimidate me, Cade.” She used his first name in an attempt to counter his effect on her. To turn the disturbing intimacy into everyday, meaningless informality.

“If that’s what you think, I apologize. Physical intimidation isn’t my style.” Even as he spoke the words, his fingers closed around her upper arm. “Come into my office. We have a lot to discuss.”

“May I suggest making your invitations sound less like orders?”

A grin slashed his face. “Now why would I want to do that? There are times when one must be persuasive, Kylie.” He led her into his office, his fingers still encircling her arm.

“I believe you mean coercive. And I don’t appreciate it, Cade.”

She was excruciatingly aware of his hand on her arm, of his nearness as he walked closely alongside her. If he wasn’t physically intimidating, he was certainly physical, and she was

reacting to him with a primal feminine awareness.

Inside his office, Cade dropped his hand and closed the door. “Is it true you lost your job?” he asked, as frankly as Bridget had blurted it out.

Kylie winced. “Unfortunately, yes. There were budget cuts—” She paused to see his dark brows arch, his glance unmistakably skeptical.

“It’s true!” she exclaimed, stung. “What did you think, that I’d been fired for—”

“Incompetence? Such a possibility never crossed my mind.”

Right words, wrong tone. He was deliberately baiting her. Kylie resolved not to rise to it. “I don’t know what, if anything, you knew about my job. But I was with the Public Defender’s office in Philadelphia. The new governor made big cuts in the state budget and left the counties to decide where and how to downsize services.”

“I’m going to take a wild guess that your department was downsized and your job along with it?”

Kylie nodded glumly. “The Philadelphia Public Defender’s office staff was one of the agencies to feel the budget ax. They cut nine full-time investigators and twelve attorneys, on the basis of seniority. I was one of the newest hires, I’d been working there since I graduated from law school two years ago.”

She gazed out the window. Cade’s big corner office had a spectacular view of Lake Erie, which lay in the distance. The rippling waters almost seemed to blend into the cloudy gray

skyline. “I don’t know how the people left in the PD’s office will ever get the job done now. Even at full staff, we were shorthanded and had too many cases. Our clients will have to bear the brunt of—”

“I’d better warn you that I’m not a bleeding heart who cries over the rights of all those unfortunate, misunderstood criminals. My sympathies lie with the victims of crimes who are usually forgotten while the legal eagles enjoy their competitive courtroom jousts.”

Kyhe stifled a groan. She’d heard that rhetoric before, too many times to count. She’d given up trying to defend herself against those who had no use for defense attorneys, especially ones paid for by state tax dollars. She stood silently, staring at the lake.

“Don’t I even rate a rebuttal?” Cade was unaccustomed to the silent treatment. He stared at her profile, his eyes lingering on the porcelain texture of her skin, the graceful curve of her neck. He couldn’t keep his eyes off her, he acknowledged resentfully, while she couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from Lake Erie.

She appeared so aloof and unreachable, very much in control. He felt an inexplicable urge to shatter her poise. To get under her skin, the way she’d so effortlessly gotten under his.

“I’m waiting for your righteous ‘even-the-most-heinous-criminal-has the-right-to-a-lawyer-who’ll-try-to-get-him-off’ spiel.” His tone and stance were as challenging as an opposing counsel’s. “So what if a homicidal psychopath walks on a

technicality? It's all in a day's work, and then you lawyers go off and have a drink together afterward."

But he didn't succeed in putting even a minor dent in Kylie's composure.

"It's not like your views toward defense lawyers are unique, you know," she said dryly. "Even my parents and my brother hated that I wasn't on the prosecution team. You haven't said anything I haven't already heard a few thousand times."

"I think you just called me a repetitive, predictable bore. Ouch."

Now what? For the first time in his memory, Cade wasn't certain what to say or do next. He was floundering and unfocused, just like this meeting. An unheard of lapse in the professional history of Cade Austin. If only she weren't so attractive, if only she were less verbally adept. If only...

Stalling for time, Cade pressed a button on the intercom. "Donna, bring Miss Brennan and me some coffee," he ordered. Donna's coffee was strong enough to power a space shuttle. Hopefully, a dose of it would jolt him out of this uncharacteristic mental morass.

A few moments later Donna entered, carrying a tray with a coffeepot, two cups and containers of cream and sugar. She placed the tray on the wide square table that stood between a charcoal gray leather sofa and two matching armchairs.

"Can I get you anything else?" Donna hovered, solicitous.

"This is fine." Cade motioned her away, and Donna obediently

headed for the door.

“Thank you very much, Donna,” Kylie said, smiling warmly. She did not approve of Cade’s cavalier manner toward his secretary and hoped that she sounded gracious enough to make up for it. He’d ordered Donna around and hadn’t even asked or thanked her properly for the favor she’d done for them!

Cade sat down on the sofa with his coffee. Across the office, Kylie stood stiffly beside his desk, making no move to join him.

He sighed. It was obvious she was displeased. Well, that was par for the course. Brennans were invariably ticked off about something. There was nothing too trivial to escape their wrath. Gene excepted, of course.

“I know you’re upset about something.” He’d decided long ago that the best way to deal with the ever-edgy clan was to be up-front with them. Kyhe was one of them; he better follow his usual procedure. “Are you offended by my opinion of the criminal justice system?”

“Hardly. You’re certainly entitled to your own opinion.”

“I agree. But if that isn’t it, what is? I’m not a mind reader so unless you tell me what’s wrong, we’re at a standstill.”

“I’ll be happy to tell you.” Kylie’s eyes flashed. “It bothers me the way you autocratically make assumptions and then imperiously act on them. For instance, you didn’t ask me if I wanted coffee, you simply demanded that Donna bring it. And when she did, you never even thanked her, you simply flicked her off like she was a—a gnat.”

"I did no such thing!" Cade jumped to his feet, indignant. The hot coffee spilled over the sides of the cup onto his fingers. He muttered a curse under his breath.

"Are you all right? Did you burn yourself?"

"I'm fine!" His fingers felt as if they were on fire as he set the cup on the table, though he would've rather faced amputation than to admit pain to her! "As for your accusation, it's ridiculous and unfair. I treat Donna and everyone else at the company with respect."

"Of course, you're denying your dictatorial behavior because it is so ingrained that you aren't even aware of how you're perceived."

"Donna has worked for me for the past six years and I can assure you that she does not perceive me as brushing her off like a gnat!"

"Maybe not." Kylie shrugged. "Because she's grown accustomed to such treatment. Just as my cousin Bndget accepted your threat to dock her pay if she didn't instantly obey your command. It's obvious to me that your management style is of the 'when you say jump, the employees must reply how high' school."

"My management style is what made this company the success it is today, Miss Brennan. BrenCo is thriving. We're not only prosperous, we're the biggest employer in this town. Your uncle certainly had no complaints when I refocused and expanded BrenCo from a small household waste disposal firm to a regional

environmental cleanup leader in its field. This past year has been BrenCo's most lucrative yet, and within the next five to ten years we'll—"

He abruptly broke off. "Damn, I see where you're headed. Typical attorney trick, create a smoke screen to obscure the facts. You're complaining about Donna when what you're really trying to do is to set up a—"

"Let me set the record straight. I was not using a smoke screen to obscure any facts, Mr. Austin. I was criticizing your management style and being quite forthright about it."

"Don't bother to equivocate. I read your agenda loud and clear, lady. You're in cahoots with your uncles to sell BrenCo," Cade said harshly. "You know that Gene's will set up provisions for BrenCo's management to remain the same until one year after his death. Now the time is up. And here you are."

Kylie guessed that health workers learning the Ebola virus was in their midst looked a lot like Cade Austin did at this moment, faced with her presence. And he seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

"Here I am," she agreed, noncommittally.

Her simple statement seemed to further infuriate him. "That this year happened to be the most productive one in the company's history has only whetted your family's urge to sell." Cade glared at her accusingly. "They have delusions of striking it rich when in reality selling the company is akin to killing the goose who laid the golden eggs. Not that I expect the Brennans to

grasp the implications of something as intricate as an allegory.”

“I’m a Brennan and I have no trouble understanding allegories,” Kylie countered.

Cade might know her relatives better than she, but they were her relatives and she was getting a little tired of listening to him take verbal swipes at them. “And I’m not in cahoots with anybody. I don’t have a hidden agenda. Are you one of those paranoid types who sees a conspiracy lurking behind every remark and every action? Your motto is Trust No One?”

“If I have a motto, it would be Trust No Brennan.” Cade glowered at her. “Gene excepted, of course.”

“Of course.” Kylie was exasperated. “Sounds like you and Uncle Gene had yourselves a merry old time, sitting around trashing the rest of the Brennans. You delighted in taking offense at perceived slights and misinterpreting everything that was said and done. Yes, I’m beginning to get a very clear picture of things now.”

“Oh, are you?”

She nodded. “Look at the way you misinterpreted this coffee incident. How you overreacted. I prefer tea, but you never bothered to ask, you ordered coffee for me and expected me to drink it. Naturally, I was annoyed by such high-handedness. Furthermore, I’m not used to being waited on. In the PD’s office, everybody served themselves. But did you give me a chance to explain anything? No! You instantly assumed that I’m a conniving, greedy witch looking for a reason to fire you and

sell this company. Didn't you?"

She advanced toward him in full cross-examination mode, her gaze piercing and intense. "Didn't you?" The sound of her own voice startled her. She'd used this tone in challenging murder suspects. It occurred to her that perhaps she was also overreacting.

"You drink tea." Cade stared at her. "You're in a snit because I didn't offer you a choice between coffee or tea?" His tone was as incredulous as his expression. "No doubt about it, you've taken the Brennan family irritability to new heights."

"I'm not in a snit. I'm trying to make a point that you don't seem to be getting. Whether it's intentional or not, I'm not quite sure. Is it?"

"Is it what? Is what it?" Cade ran his hand through his hair, tousling it. His head was spinning. "This is crazy." Or maybe he was headed that way.

He felt frazzled, completely befuddled. The Brennans had always driven Gene nuts. His late boss had long ago delegated dealing with them to Cade, who merely found them annoying, not insanity-inducing. But this Brennan...Kylie Brennan...

The two of them were practically standing toe-to-toe. Her aggressive advance had fallen into the category of physical intimidation—which she'd accused him of using!—and brought them very close. Not that Cade was feeling the least bit intimidated. He was feeling...aroused.

Everytime he inhaled, the scent of her perfume filled his

nostrils. It was a subtle, spicy, sexy aroma, just like her, and it further clouded his thoughts. The urge to touch her was so overpowering that he would've given in to it had he not beaten a purposeful retreat to the window. A tactical victory for her, but at this point he was too disconcerted to care.

"I can't stress how strongly I disapprove of you treating Donna like a servant," Kylie scolded his back, which he'd turned toward her. "It's pure classism. I am also opposed to sexism, racism and ageism," she felt compelled to add, just for the record.

"Well, so am I!" Cade exclaimed. She was the defense attorney, but she had him on the defensive for sure. "BrenCo is an equal opportunity employer. We've won citations for our fair hiring practices."

"I'm very glad to hear that." Kylie was genuinely relieved. "It would be awkward to have to report BrenCo to the EEOC, although I wouldn't hesitate to do so if the situation warranted."

Cade turned to gape at her. "How did we get from you preferring tea to the EEOC?"

"Actually, I'm not sure." Kylie's blue eyes were troubled. She'd always prided herself on her talent for presenting her points in a coherent and lucid form in the courtroom. "My clients would've been toast if I made the sort of irrational leaps I seem to be making today. You—confuse me," she admitted, averting her gaze from him to Lake Erie on the horizon.

"Glad to hear it. The feeling happens to be mutual." Cade began to pace the office, back and forth, on edge and ready for

action.

Kylie remembered a National Geographic special on TV featuring a leopard pacing his territory in a remarkably similar prowling. Keeping in mind the unlucky mammal who'd wandered into the leopard's line of vision, she took a few prudent steps out of Cade's path, just to be on the safe side.

"You confound me in a way I never thought a Brennan could," he growled. "Or anybody else, for that matter." The admission did not please him.

They stared uneasily at each other for a few long moments.

"We've gotten off to a bad start." Kylie was the first to speak.

"A perceptive observation," muttered Cade. He grabbed his coffee and took a large gulp. And nearly choked. The brew was so ghastly it made airline coffee taste like a gourmet specialty brand.

Kylie was watching him. "I think I'll definitely stick to tea," she murmured.

Their eyes met. Kylie caught her lower lip between her teeth in a nervous gesture she rarely resorted to anymore. But Cade Austin made her nervous, and in a way that was exciting, not threatening. Which made him all the more dangerous.

She drew a sharp breath. "Do you think we could start over?"

"We can do whatever you want, Kylie."

His sudden suggestive smile made her heart jump. She knew instinctively that he was quite aware of his own masculine appeal and wielded it when necessary. He'd decided to use it now, as an

alternative maneuver.

Kylie realized just how susceptible she could be when he chose to disarm her with his charm. “I’m speaking professionally,” she said quickly. “As a public defender, I’m accustomed to seeking common ground in my clients’ best interests and in this case—”

“You’re not a public defender anymore, Kylie. Thanks to the terms of Gene’s will, you’re a businesswoman and an important figure in this community. I don’t know if you’re fully aware of how dependent Port McClain is on BrenCo or the economic impact the company has on this town.”

“You mean like in ‘if BrenCo sneezes, Port McClain catches a cold?’” She paraphrased the old General Motors maxim.

His smile widened, and this time it was reflected in his eyes. “Exactly like that.”

Kylie reminded herself to breathe. Maybe starting over on friendly terms wasn’t such a good idea, after all. It was easier to keep her composure and her imagination in check if she was feeling hostile toward him. When he smiled at her in that particular way, she could feel herself melting inside. She wanted to please him, to do whatever it took to keep him smiling... A dangerous notion, indeed.

Get a grip, Kylie, she ordered herself. She was not here to please Cade Austin, and she was on a lot safer ground when he was scowling at her.

“I know it’s my responsibility to learn everything about the

company and its impact on the town. I was stunned when I heard that Uncle Gene had left controlling interest in BrenCo to me. No more than you were, probably,” she added with a wry grimace.

“The contents of Gene’s will turned out to be a surprise to a lot of people.”

“The understatement of the year, no doubt. Well, I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but owning any part of a toxic waste plant wasn’t exactly my idea of a dream come true.”

“BrenCo isn’t simply a toxic waste plant, Kylie. We take environmental waste from all over the state—and other states, too—and properly dispose of it in a way that is not only safe but beneficial to the environment.” Cade’s hazel eyes gleamed. “I expect all your liberal cohorts in the Public Defender’s office would deny such technology even exists. That crowd believes no waste is the only safe waste, a ridiculous, hopeless point of view. Even the fires of our cave ancestors released waste products into the air.”

“I know. I—haven’t mentioned my inheritance to anyone,” she confessed, a little sheepishly.

“Afraid of being dubbed the Princess of Toxic Waste by all your green friends?”

Kylie tilted her head and gazed at him from under her lashes, the feminine signals elemental and unconscious. “Why do you assume that my cohorts and friends are all wild-eyed liberals?”

“It’s a natural assumption. If there is such a thing as a conservative public defender, I’d bet my shares in BrenCo that he

has a multiple personality disorder with each alter unaware of what the others are doing. You can imagine the mayhem that will ensue when the conflicting personalities finally collide in the poor sap's conscious mind."

Kylie laughed. "You surprise me," she admitted. "I wouldn't have thought you were capable of appreciating the absurd."

"I wouldn't have lasted eight minutes, let alone eight years, in this town filled with Brennans if I didn't have a healthy appreciation of the absurd."

"Brennans. You talk about them as if they're a separate species."

"Now you're catching on. Brennans fall somewhere between vampires and parasites, though precise classification has yet to be established."

He was kidding, displaying an even greater, healthier appreciation of the absurd. Wasn't he? "Gene excepted, of course," she interjected his usual disclaimer.

"Gene excepted, of course. And according to Gene, your dad would have to be excepted, too. Gene admired your father, he was very proud of him. He often boasted about his brother Wayne, the navy captain who commanded a battleship and lived all over the world. He was a fan of your big brother, too. Gene always referred to him as 'my-favorite-nephew-Devlin-the-doctor.'"

"Devlin is finishing his orthopedic surgical residency at the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor," Kylie

lapsed naturally into her role of proud sister and daughter. “Dad is retired now. He and Mom are living in Florida and still aren’t sure how they’ll adjust to staying in the same place for more than a few years.”

“If they’re like my folks, who are retired army, they’ll end up buying an RV and trolling the interstates on endless trips. Occasionally, they swing by Port McClain to see me.”

“In March, no doubt. After all, it’s the perfect time to visit here. The lake-effect wind and all that snow are big draws.”

“Touché.” Cade raised his brows again in that particular way of his.

Kylie raised her eyebrows right back. “Maybe Bridget’s antiskilodge will be packing in crowds on their next visit.”

“You’re really on a roll here, aren’t you?” Cade’s voice was deceptively mild as he studied her.

She was flirting with him. Or was she? Given their volatile interaction since she’d set foot in his office, there was always the chance she was expressing her antipathy to him. What a blunder it would be to mistake aversion for flirtation!

But Cade was a risk-taker by nature. He took one now and moved closer to her. Close enough to cup her chin in one hand and tilt her head a little.

Kylie felt the world careen. He was going to kiss her; she could read the hot sensual intent in his eyes. And she was going to let him. She wanted him to kiss her, she wanted it very much.

The realization stunned her. This kind of behavior was

completely unlike her. She'd never been driven by sexual urges. She was too cerebral, governed by her head, not her body's impulses.

Yet here she was, melting against Cade Austin as he pulled her into his arms. Closing her eyes as his mouth lowered to hers. Parting her lips for the breathlessly anticipated impact of his...

Two

"Cade, I'm sorry to interrupt but Bobbie Brennan is on the phone," Donna's voice, loud and clear, sounded over the intercom.

Startled, Kylie and Cade jumped away from each other as if they'd been blasted apart by a bomb.

Kylie's heartbeat thundered in her ears. She'd come so close to kissing Cade Austin that she had felt the warmth of his breath on her face. She'd been in his arms, his body pressing into hers, the formidable length of him, hard and strong, revealing the force of his own desire. The intimate recall made her shake. Heat scorched her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Cade sink into his desk chair. She walked unsteadily to the window and touched her forehead to the cool glass.

"Bobbie says it's an emergency and she must speak to you immediately," Donna stated.

"An emergency?" Kylie snapped to attention. She turned around, her eyes widened with alarm.

"Don't worry, it's probably nothing serious. Everything is an

emergency to Bobbie.” Cade heaved a groan. “The cornerstones of her personality are hysterics and vengeance, and one fuels the other.”

“I told Bobbie you were in an important conference and couldn’t be interrupted but needless to say, she refuses to take ‘no’ for an answer,” Donna continued. “She threatened to come down and break into your office with a hatchet if she had to. I decided we’d better not risk it.”

“We’ve learned the hard way that ignoring Bobbie is not the way to go,” Cade said tightly.

“Do you really think Aunt Bobbie would hatchet her way into your office?” Kylie was incredulous.

“There is already a long list of outrageous things Bobbie has done, when thwarted. Taking a hatchet to my office door would not be a stretch for her.”

“Get ready, Cade,” Donna warned. She sounded like a pilot announcing an emergency landing. “I’m putting her call through on speaker phone right now.”

“Cade!” Bobbie Brennan’s shriek filled the office.

Nails on a chalkboard sounded euphonious in comparison. Kylie flinched.

“Brent is in jail!” Bobbie screamed. “They set bail at twenty-five thousand dollars! A fortune!”

“Remember that you pay a bail bondsman ten percent which is twenty-five hundred dollars, Bobbie,” Cade reminded her.

“I don’t have that kind of money for a bail bondsman. It may as

well be twenty-five million! What are we going to do, Cade? Oh, this couldn't have come at a worse time! I'm all out of patience with Brent, this time he's gone too far!" Bobbie's tone grew even more vitriolic. "It's all Artie's fault, damn him! He's a terrible father, he's the cause of all Brent's problems."

"Tell me why Brent is in jail, Bobbie. What are the charges against him?" Cade had to ask three times before she stopped yelling long enough to hear him

"I wrote down what the cop said, but I'm crying too hard to read my writing." Bobbie sobbed noisily.

"Shall I call Artie and ask him?" Cade asked.

"No! That loser is the reason Brent is in jail." Bobbie's sobs instantly ceased. "Brent has been charged with second degree burglary. You see, Artie rented out the basement of his house to this nasty young couple—I told him not to do it!—and Brent put a video camera behind a two-way mirror with a hole in it so he could tape that couple in their bedroom."

"Tape them without their consent?" interrupted Cade.

"So they say." Bobbie gave a very audible sniff. "They claimed they noticed a light in the mirror and investigated it and found the hidden camera, then called the police."

"Did Brent say why he was taping this couple?" Cade asked, grimacing.

"He—Brent—said he was going to turn the tape into a movie." Bobbie's voice grew lower. "You know, like one of those art films."

“An art film,” Cade echoed flatly. “Just a minute, Bobbie.” He switched off the phone. “Well, this is a new one. Brent, with art film aspirations.”

“More than likely, he planned to sell the tapes to one of those places that pays for privately made porn videos,” Kylie murmured. “In Philadelphia, a copy could go for as high as five hundred dollars.”

“Does Bobbie have her facts straight? Granted, what Brent did is sleazy and illegal but is it really burglary?”

“It sure is.” Kylie nodded her assent. “We’ve tried similar cases. Second-degree burglary covers unauthorized filming of individuals.”

“That sleazy little jerk has outdone himself this time.” Cade’s expression was equal parts disgust and impatience. He switched Bobbie back on. “Have you called an attorney for Brent, Bobbie?”

“Of course not!” she howled. “I called you! We have to get Brent out of jail right away, Cade. You know what can happen to a good-looking boy like him in a place like that!”

“You’ve seen too many prison movies, Bobbie. Nothing is going to happen to Brent in the Port McClain lockup.” Cade’s tone was both firm and reassuring. “Besides, he’s spent time there before. Remember the last time he was arrested? We decided that sitting in that cell would be a good lesson for him. He spent a week there and it didn’t hurt him a bit. In fact, he’s stayed out of trouble until now, nearly two years later, and that’s a record

for him.”

“I hoped he was finally growing up. I was going to ask you to give him another chance at BrenCo.” Bobbie began weeping again.

“Bobbie, you know what Gene said. No more chances for Brent at BrenCo. It was even written in his will. I won’t hire Brent for a job here, no matter what,” Cade added with absolute finality.

“Maybe you would if Brent got himself together,” countered Bobbie, ignoring Cade’s absolute finality. “Damn Artie! He had to go and rent out the basement! You can be sure we didn’t see a dime of that couple’s rent money, Artie kept it all for himself. Cade, I can’t afford to bail out Brent and I don’t know if Artie will do it or not.”

“Then Brent can stay in jail till his hearing, Bobbie. He’s not a child, and he shouldn’t expect his parents to bail him out—literally—every time he gets into trouble.” Cade caught Kylie’s eye. She nodded her agreement

“Whose side are you on?” Bobbie swung from sorrow to rage. “Artie’s? He doesn’t care if Brent rots in jail, either!” In the next breath, her tone turned whiney. “Did you remember that Brenda and I have to take Starr Lynn to the regional novice competition in Detroit next week? We’ll have expenses—food and gas and the motel. And Starr Lyna needs an extra special skating costume. We found one that is absolutely perfect for her. It costs six hundred fifty dollars, plus tax.”

“Six hundred fifty dollars for an ice-skating costume for a twelve-year-old is ridiculous, Bobbie,” Cade said calmly.

“It’s not unreasonable, some of the girls have costumes that cost nine hundred fifty. Are you going to help us or not, Cade?” demanded Bobbie. “I can always send Brenda over to your place tonight to—”

“No, not Brenda!” Cade said so fervently that Kylie was instantly on alert. She studied him even more closely. “Look, Bobbie, let me make a few phone calls about Brent. Meanwhile, promise me you’ll at least look for another costume for Starr Lynn. You have a week till the competition.”

“We’ll look, but I doubt that we’ll find anything else so perfect for Starr Lynn. And she deserves the best, Cade. Even you know that. Call me tonight about Brent.” Bobbie hung up abruptly and with such force that the sound of the receiver slamming echoed throughout the office.

“Good Lord!” breathed Kylie.

“Don’t drag Him into it,” Cade said dryly. “Well, Ms. Public Defender, feel like taking your cousin’s case?”

“I’m not a member of the Ohio Bar. I can’t practice law in this state unless I’m granted reciprocity.”

“Which you haven’t even applied for?” guessed Cade. “Smart move on your part. Defending your cousin Brent would be as thankless a job as your last one.”

Kylie ignored the dig. “Why did Aunt Bobbie dump Brent’s arrest on you?” she asked curiously. “What are you supposed

to do about it? And what's all this about a six-hundred-dollar skating costume?"

"Six-fifty, plus tax." Cade rubbed the back of his neck, then heaved a resigned sigh. "Even though you aren't licensed to practice here, you fire questions like a professional inquisitor."

"Maybe you wouldn't mind answering them?" she prompted.

"Let me tell you a little about the Brennans of Port McClain, Kylie. At any given time, one of them is either feuding with another or feels miffed or snubbed or cheated in some way. They've made a life-style of backstabbing and bickering."

"And being thrown in jail?"

"So far, jail has been the sole province of your cousin Brent, a fact for which we can all be grateful. The reason I'm so knowledgeable about the Brennans and why my number is programmed into Bobbie's phone is because your uncle Gene anointed me Alpha Male of the clan. Gene's brothers and their wives and kids were always trying to drag him into their civil wars, and it bothered him so much that he delegated his patriarch position to me. Gene was very good at delegating," he added wryly.

"So you not only run BrenCo, you also mediate family feuds?"

"I've had far more success managing the company than I've had trying to keep peace among the Brennans. Reaching a consensus among that group is harder than getting a unanimous vote in the UN General Assembly."

"I know that Uncle Artie and Aunt Bobbie's divorce was very

bitter,” Kylie murmured. “That’s really all I know about it.”

The Brennan extended family had played only a minor role in the lives of her very mobile, very nuclear family—which made it both strange and awkward that she was now involved via Uncle Gene’s will.

“Wish I could say the same,” growled Cade. “Well, let me bring you up to date. Artie and Bobbie have been divorced fifteen—or is it sixteen?—years but are still deeply entrenched in each other’s lives. They are one of those tiresome couples who are eternally obsessed with each other.”

“Obsessed with making each other miserable?”

Cade nodded. “They’re masters of the art. I suppose you could say that Brent’s problems are the result of his dysfunctional family but he’s no longer a troubled teen, he’s twenty-seven years old. I consider him to be fully responsible for his own actions.”

“I agree,” said Kylie.

He looked surprised. “I thought a bleeding heart type like you would drag out the crying towel and use Brent’s unhappy childhood and his battling parents to excuse him.”

“Maybe I would, if I were defending him in court. But since I’m not...” Kylie’s voice trailed off, leaving the obvious unsaid. “I haven’t seen Brent in years. But I do have an indelible memory of him from when we were kids. He lured me into the attic of Uncle Gene’s house by telling me that our grandmother had a trunk filled with dolls there. When I looked into the trunk, he shoved me in and locked it. I don’t think he had any intention of

ever letting me out.”

“Ah, Brennan family fun.” Cade smiled sardonically. “See what you missed by not growing up here in Port McClain with the rest of the tribe? How did you get out of the trunk, by the way?”

“Lucky for me, my brother noticed I wasn’t around and figured that Brent had something to do with it. Devlin persuaded Brent to admit it and lead him to me ”

“Dare I ask how Devlin persuaded Brent?”

“He, uh, punched Brent in the nose,” Kylie confessed sheepishly. “And broke it.”

“Ah, bullying. As I mentioned earlier, it works well with certain Brennans. And I like the irony of Devlin’s progression from breaking bones to setting bones as his life’s work. That little bit of family history does explain why both Artie and Bobbie refer to your brother as ‘that thug.’ It’s one of the few things they agree on.”

“My mom and dad refer to Brent as ‘that monster.’ After the trunk incident, whenever we came to visit in Port McClain our parents kept Dev and me away from Brent. And after Uncle Artie and Aunt Bobbie’s divorce, we didn’t see much of Brenda or Bridget, either.”

“What about your other cousins, Guy and Lauretta’s kids? Did you spend much time with them?”

“No. Todd and Polly were a lot younger than Dev and me. And Ian—”

“Was an obnoxious creep?” suggested Cade. “He still is. Surprisingly enough, Todd and Polly are okay. Even likable, a fact that continually takes me by surprise.”

“Maybe they were somehow switched at birth?” Kylie suggested drolly.

“Maybe they were.” Cade grinned, then grew serious once again. “Your cousin Todd is in his junior year at Ohio State, majoring in business and Polly will graduate from Port McClain High in June. She has a scholarship to OSU and wants to study engineering. Both kids want to work for BrenCo someday and I think they’ll be assets to the company. BrenCo should be here for them to return to, Kylie. It is Gene’s legacy to his family and to this town,” he added, willing her to meet his gaze.

Kylie averted her eyes from the pull of his. She’d been warned by her uncles that Cade would apply strong pressure to sway her to his point of view—which was to keep BrenCo a privately held company with him at the head. Asking her to consider the future of the younger Brennans seemed to be yet another strategy.

She couldn’t immediately choose sides, Kylie reminded herself. She had to be like a judge and listen to all the arguments, to weigh all the evidence and information before rendering a decision. Keep the company in its current state or sell it to one of the giant firms that would merge BrenCo into their conglomerate? Her uncles, aided by cousin Ian, had invited an industry agent to town to explain the advantages of a sale and merger. She had to hear him out. Her decision was too vital to

be rushed.

“Tell me why Aunt Bobbie wants to buy Starr Lynn a six-hundred-fifty-dollar ice-skating costume,” she asked lightly, in a deliberate change of subject. “Plus tax.”

She could tell by Cade’s expression that he wasn’t pleased with her blatant stall. She watched him assessing her—perhaps debating what tactic to take with this latest backstabbing, bickering Brennan who’d been inflicted upon him? Bullying, maybe? Kylie braced herself, prepared to fight back.

Instead, Cade returned to the coffee table and this time drained his cup of the dark murky brew.

“Your cousin Brenda’s daughter Starr Lynn wants to be a figure skater. I guess you could say she already is one. She’s been taking ice-skating lessons since she was four. The kid is definitely talented. She’s won a number of novice competitions—that is the level just below the juniors which is just below the seniors—and she’s being considered for admission to one of the top programs in the country at the Winterhurst Ice Rink in Lakewood. Bobbie and Brenda see Olympic gold in her future, and given Starr Lynn’s talent and drive, it’s not a totally unwarranted dream.”

“You sound vaguely fond of Starr Lynn.” Kylie settled into the charcoal gray leather chair across from Cade’s, her thoughts centering on Starr Lynn Brennan, aged twelve.

She hadn’t seen Brenda’s child in years, though she remembered when Starr Lynn had been born. Vividly. Brenda, seventeen at the time, hadn’t been married and it had been

something of a family scandal, even for the Wayne Brennans living on a naval base in Europe, far from Port McClain.

“Starr Lynn is amazing out there on the ice.” Cade’s voice tore Kylie from her reverie. “She works so hard, getting up at dawn to practice, going to school and then putting in more hours of practice. Then there’s her skating and dancing lessons and all the competitions. The kid is a real trouper,” he added gruffly.

“You are fond of her!” Kylie marveled. Her eyes narrowed a bit. “What about her mother? I haven’t seen much of Brenda in the past several years but she’s always been pretty...and sexy.”

She was horrified by the acerbic note that had slipped into her voice and hoped that Cade wouldn’t notice.

A vain hope. He smiled, a smug cat-who’d-chowed-down-the-canary grin. “Brenda is still pretty and still sexy in that flashy bad girl way of hers.” He leaned back in his chair and met Kylie’s eyes. “Every now and then, Brenda decides that I would be a good match for her. I have never agreed. You can believe it when I say that Brenda Brennan holds all the appeal of a rattlesnake for me. Make that a rattlesnake about to strike and me without an antivenom kit.”

“So that’s why you panicked when Aunt Bobbie suggested sending Brenda over to your place tonight?”

“I did not panic!”

“Yes, you did.” Kylie was aware that she was entirely too elated by his rejection of her cousin Brenda.

The feeling disconcerted her. How petty, how unlike her.

She was not jealous of Brenda! Yet she couldn't deny the relief—the thrill?—of listening to Cade compare her cousin to a rattlesnake. Did she possess some long dormant Brennan vs. Brennan tendencies, which suddenly had been activated?

Cade Austin would undoubtedly think so. She saw the way he was watching her and blushed. Suddenly, an escape from his probing hazel eyes was essential.

"I've taken up enough of your time." Kylie jumped to her feet and headed toward the door. "I should have called first and made an appointment. I—I'm sure you have things to do and I'm keeping you from them."

"As president of BrenCo, I always have things to do." Cade followed her to the door, then moved in front of it. "But I always have time for our major stockholder, of course. You don't need to make an appointment, you have a standing one with me, Kylie. Whenever you want it."

His back was against the door, blocking it. "Would you like a tour of the plant? Perhaps an overview of company policy? A look at our financial records and written long-range goals?" While his words were strictly business, his tone and his expression conveyed an entirely different message.

Kylie interpreted the subtext, but not quickly enough. Before she could speak, move or even breathe, Cade's hands were on her waist, pulling her to him.

No one had ever been so physical with her. The men in her world were talkers who used words, not actions. Kylie could

match any man verbally—even best them—but dealing on a tactile level was a very different playing field for her. Just as Cade Austin was very different from the men she knew. He acted first, without explanation or warning or eloquent discourse.

Kylie felt the warmth of his hard frame suffuse her. His big hands slid to her hips and settled her against his masculine strength. Instinctively her legs parted, letting her feel the full burgeoning force of his manhood.

The effect on Kylie was electrifying. The rampant sexuality of their position abruptly short-circuited the rational workings of her brain. Instead of thinking things through and behaving rationally, she ceded to the elemental craving he'd elicited deep within her. For the first time in her careful, well organized life, she impulsively acted on what she was feeling—and that was a powerful, hungry need that demanded to be assuaged.

His mouth came down on hers, taking her lips and parting them in a kiss that was unlike any she'd ever known. This was no idle or tentative getting-to-know-you kiss. Cade kissed her as if he already knew her very well, as if he knew all about her secret yearnings and would fulfill them whenever he chose.

His kiss was hard and deep and intimate, demanding and receiving her body's most primitive, passionate response. It was a kiss outside the realm of her experience, beyond the constraints her mind persisted in placing on her emotions.

But there were no constraints now, not with Cade. He'd somehow slipped past her usual defenses and circumvented her

control.

Her arms were around his neck and she was clinging to him, her anchor in the wild unfamiliar sea of sensuality. She gasped a shuddering breath when he boldly covered her breast with his hand. It was too much too fast, Kylie knew it. She'd spent years fending off unwanted intimacies, usually more bored than angered by such attempts.

But she was neither bored nor angry now. And the too-soon intimacy that Cade was taking was not unwanted. Far from it. Kylie felt the heat of his palm cupping her, felt his long fingers begin a slow massage, and she loved it. A little whimper escaped from her throat and she quivered with sensual pleasure.

Through the soft silk of her blouse, through the lace of her bra, he rubbed her nipple with his thumb. The tight bud was achingly sensitive, and she pressed against his hand, encouraging him, needing more. An erotic barrage of hot little sparks burned in the most secret, feminine part of her.

He was hard and virile and continued to press boldly against her, evoking a syrupy warmth that flowed through her. She felt soft and weak and plant. When his hands cupped her buttocks to lift her higher and harder against him, Kylie clung tighter to him, moist and swollen with desire.

The intensity of her response shocked and excited her. She'd never experienced such fiery sensuality before, she had begun to believe she was one of those strictly analytical types whose passion could only be expressed in her work. A cool, methodical

woman whose thrills came from the mental gymnastics required in preparing or presenting a case in a court-room, not from a man's kisses and caresses.

Cade Austin was proving her very wrong. He wasn't simply a man, he was the man, and he was shattering all those myths she'd held about herself. In his arms, she'd become a passionate woman. The wild and wanton thoughts tumbling through her mind were as new and as stimulating as the feelings surging through her. And it seemed that Cade could read them all...

He scooped her up in his arms. Another first for her. She couldn't remember ever being carried, though presumably it was her mode of transport before she'd learned to walk.

She was totally unprepared for and completely defenseless against the tantalizing sensation of being lifted in a man's arms and held against his chest as he strode across the office.

Kylie—the stable, dependable defender of the less fortunate—suddenly felt seductive and intensely feminine, like a character out of one of those romance novels she never had the time or inclination to read. Cade was so big, so strong. He handled her with ease, laying her down on the charcoal gray leather sofa and then coming down on top of her.

Her head was spinning, her eyelids felt extraordinarily heavy. It took too much energy and effort to keep them open so she allowed them to close, plunging her into a dark world of pure sensation.

He kissed her again, and she wrapped her arms around him,

savoring the hard warm weight of him. The taste of him, the feel of him was exactly what she wanted, what she needed. She slipped her hands under the jacket of his suit to knead the muscular length of his back. The cloth barrier of his shirt frustrated her; she wanted to feel his bare skin beneath her fingers. She tugged at the material tucked into the waistband of his trousers, trying to get it out of her way.

Before she could succeed, Cade pushed aside her jacket and opened her blouse. Kylie felt his fingers deftly unfasten the front clasp of her bra. She knew she was exposed to him but instead of trying to cover herself, she arched upward, yielding greater access to him.

The touch of his hands on her bare breasts unleashed piercing shards of desire deeply within her, too pleasurable to even consider ending. He fondled her, stroking and caressing, making her desperate for more.

“Cade, please!” She hardly recognized that desperate, husky cry as her own voice.

“I know, sweetie, I know.” His voice was thick and raspy. “Me, too.”

Kylie reached up to touch the hard, shaven skin of his cheek. She was charmed by his inarticulate mutter. She needed no translation, she knew exactly what he was saying. That he was as wonderfully out of control as she was. That he wanted her in the same fierce way that she wanted him.

Then his mouth was on the soft skin of her breast, kissing a

sensuous path to its taut center that was tingling with arousal. She held her breath as his lips closed over her nipple to gently suckle her, then moaned as flames of desire licked through her. She hadn't known that a man's mouth on her breasts could affect her like this. The sensation was so intense, it was exquisite pleasure bordering on acute need.

His fingers slipped beneath the layers of her panty hose and white cotton panties to caress the soft, bare flesh of her belly. She felt him trace her navel, and she reflexively sucked in her stomach to provide him easier access. He dipped his thumb into the small hollow and kindled a wildfire that streaked directly to the pulsing heart of her femininity.

Kylie squirmed, trying to clench her legs together to ease the consuming ache there. Cade moved his thigh higher between hers, pressing against her. It helped but not enough. She wanted, she needed...

"Yes?" Cade murmured.

Through the dizzying fog of sensuality, Kylie realized that he was seeking her permission to continue. She wondered why he'd bothered; he didn't have to ask. Stopping him was the farthest thing from her mind. She wanted him with an urgency that bordered on desperation.

"Yes," she whispered.

She had no sooner spoken the word when Donna's voice boomed into the office once again, irrevocably shattering their private sensual cocoon. "Cade, Noah is here for your lunch

meeting with the mayor.”

Cade muttered an oath. Kylie’s eyes flew open.

He was kneeling on one knee above her, in the process of sliding her panties and panty hose over her hips. Kylie gasped as the reality of the situation struck her with the force of an anvil. She was on the verge of having sex with a man she hardly knew!

“Kylie, I know this interruption isn’t what either of us wanted to happen, but—”

“Get away from me!” she ordered, her voice little more than a raspy whisper.

She was horrified, Sex on the sofa in Cade Austin’s office? What had she been thinking?

The answer, of course, was that she hadn’t been thinking at all.

“I completely forgot that Noah and I are to have lunch with the mayor today. That’s Noah Wyckoff, our senior vice president of operations.” Cade caressed her midriff, seemingly mesmerized by the contrast of his tanned fingers against the snowy whiteness of her skin.

“I don’t care who he is or who you’re having lunch with.” Kylie slapped his hands away and tried to sit up, a difficult feat with him hovering over her. “Let me go right now!”

Instead, he stunned her by picking her up again and carrying her toward a door at the far end of his office. His movements were so sudden, so unexpected that Kylie had no time to rally a protest. He’d opened the door and put her on her feet before she could utter a sound.

Kylie glanced around her. She was standing in a well-appointed bathroom—the executive washroom?—and Cade had reclosed the door, leaving her alone to repair her hair, makeup and clothing.

“Kylie, you’ll need this.” Cade rapped lightly on the door, then handed her purse to her.

Kylie snatched it with shaking fingers and swiftly slammed the door shut. He was so cool, so self-possessed! How had he recovered his wits and his composure so quickly, while she was still a shivering, quivering, unable-to-think-straight mess?

She forced herself to face the painful truth. Obviously, Cade hadn’t been as sensually enthralled as she’d been. It was a devastating conclusion, both insulting and humiliating, but Kylie had never been one to hide behind the walls of denial.

One quick glance in the mirror made her groan aloud. Her mouth was moist and swollen and looked well-kissed, her lipstick was missing in action. And her hair...Kylie winced. It was in tousled disarray. She looked like she’d been doing exactly what she had been doing—indulging in a hot sexual tryst on the office sofa!

Moments later, she heard voices in the office, Cade’s and another man’s, presumably Noah Wyckoff, whose untimely appearance had interrupted the most impassioned episode in her life. The stupidest episode in her life, Kylie silently amended, reassessing the encounter through a critical, analytical eye.

Though she had been swept away, Cade had not been

over-powered by that same wild abandon. And now, viewed in retrospect, his passionate advances seemed calculated, his recovery too quick and complete.

Kylie trembled. It hurt that his seemingly spontaneous burst of passion had actually been premeditated, a means of controlling her. He had seen her attraction to him and decided to use it to his advantage. Seducing BrenCo's major stockholder would be a real coup for the company president, bent on using her to further his own arms.

Her cheeks flamed. It was difficult enough to admit that she had lost her self-control and been ready to surrender—aching to surrender!—to a man she'd known less than an hour. But acknowledging that he had been playing sexual games with her, that she had been alone on that passion-drugged cloud, carried her to new heights of mortification. And outrage.

Her uncles had warned her that Cade Austin was ruthless and would stop at nothing to get his own way. It seemed that they were telling the truth.

Determinedly, Kylie worked on putting herself together until the mirror showed the reflection of an immaculately groomed woman, as cool and untouched by passion as she'd always believed herself to be. She pulled open the bathroom door and entered Cade's office.

The tall, wiry, bearded man talking to Cade started visibly at the sight of her. "I—didn't realize you had company, Cade," Noah Wyckoff murmured, glancing from Cade to Kylie, then

back again.

“Ms. Brennan isn’t company, Noah. She owns the company,” Cade said. “I’d like you to meet—our boss.” He completed the introductions.

Kylie noted sourly that unlike herself, Cade hadn’t required a sojourn in the bathroom to eliminate any telltale evidence of their hot little interlude. She had needed a mirror, makeup, a comb and a vital rearrangement of her clothing to look as unruffled and undisturbed as he did—after no ablutions at all!

“Noah and I go back a long way,” Cade said smoothly, filling in what could have been an awkward silence. “We were college roommates at MIT, three years in the dorms, one in an apartment that almost got condemned by the health department.”

Noah chuckled at the memory. “Those were the days.”

“How very interesting,” Kylie managed to choke. She was seething. Cade spoke with the easy assurance of a host making small talk at a cocktail party. Another strike against him, for she was still too rattled to carry off a semblance of conversational patter.

She decided Cade Austin was as slick as an oil spill, which brought her to the unhappy conclusion that she had almost succumbed to the practiced charms of a smooth operator. Another appalling realization in a day that seemed to be filled with them. And it was only lunchtime!

The tension in the office was palpable. Noah cleared his throat. “Will you be joining us for lunch, Ms. Brennan?” he asked

politely.

“No,” Kylie said, more sharply than she’d intended. She had nothing against Noah Wyckoff but the prospect of spending another moment in Cade’s company was intolerable.

“I have an appointment.” She swept from the office without looking back.

“I’ll be in touch, Kylie.” Cade’s voice followed her into the corridor.

A promise or a threat? Kylie mused cynically, deciding it must be the latter. Well, he was in for a surprise the next time he got in touch with her because she was prepared for him now. She knew the lengths to which he’d go to influence her, to control her. All her defenses were on alert and ready for their next encounter.

She could hardly wait.

Three

“That one is an entirely new Brennan prototype, one we haven’t seen before,” Noah remarked after Kylie’s departure. “The Ice Queen. I swear the room temperature in here rose twenty degrees the moment she walked out.”

“You think she’s cold?” Cade gritted through his teeth, staring at the door through which Kylie had just exited.

“You think she’s not?” Noah gave a short laugh. “With her around we won’t need to build an autoclave to dispose of medical waste, she can freeze it with a single glance.” He flopped down onto the sofa and sighed. “Of course, we won’t be building anything if she sells BrenCo.”

“Which Artie and Guy Brennan are desperate for her to do.”

“She won’t listen to them, will she?”

“I have no idea what Kylie Brennan will do.” Cade stared sightlessly at the intricate patterns of the Oriental carpet at his feet. He felt disoriented, as if he’d been flung from a whirling carousel. Yet he was supposed to stand here, still and steady, without displaying a trace of the disequilibrium that had him reeling.

Though Kylie had left the office, she remained so firmly ensconced in his head that the images running before his mind’s eye seemed more real than Noah’s actual presence. Cade pictured her face, softened with passion. He could taste the sweetness of her mouth and feel the sultry heat of her body pressed to his.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so affected, so consumed by a kiss. He had learned early on that a kiss was simply a preliminary, a means to the climactic end. But kissing Kylie had been so exciting, so arousing, it was an end in itself.

And then he pictured her breasts, so round and full and milky white, the nipples a dark dusky rose. He remembered the way she had responded to him, how she’d clung to him, moaning her pleasure as his mouth closed over those sensitive little buds.

It had been so good and he wanted more, much more. They had barely begun when they’d had to stop, and now his body was tense and throbbing with all those unmet needs she’d aroused in him.

Cade groaned.

“We have to think positively,” Noah said, misinterpreting the cause, though not the source, of his old friend’s apparent agony. “Gene named her his heir, so he must’ve seen something in her that set her apart from the rest of the clan. I mean, imagine what we’d be facing if he’d left Guy those shares! BrenCo would be sold as fast as you can say ‘Lauretta wants an in-ground swimming pool, a fur coat and a fancy vacation to brag about.’”

“She said she had an appointment.” Cade began to pace the office. “Who with? One of the uncles?”

“I got the impression she just said that to blow us off,” Noah said frankly. “She seemed like she was in a big hurry to get out of here.”

“Yeah,” Cade agreed, frowning. “She couldn’t wait to get away.”

From him. That rankled. He remembered the way Kylie had looked at him when she’d emerged from the bathroom, appearing as perfect and untouched as a porcelain doll that had never been removed from its box. He’d had to exert considerable willpower to keep from snatching her into his arms and transforming her back into that passion-mussed creature who had lain beneath him, warm and soft and hungry for him.

But the cold disdain in her blue eyes had served as an effective restraint. She’d glared at him as if he were some kind of unspeakable substance she’d accidentally stepped in. Cade read her loud and clear...she didn’t want him to come anywhere near her.

He knew if they had been alone, he would have handled things differently. He would've tried to convince her that not only did she want him near, but she wanted him deep inside her. And judging by her explosive response to him earlier, he could have succeeded.

But Noah's presence halted any such attempt. What had gone on between Kylie and himself was intensely private; Cade wanted no third-party involvement, not even his best friend's. So he'd allowed Kylie to sweep out like the Ice Queen Noah believed her to be, rather than acting on those primitive possessive urges rushing through him. They were still rushing through him.

"Did you hear the latest breaking news on the Brennan front?" Noah asked, drawing a pensive Cade's attention. "Brent has been arrested and is in jail. Get this, he'd set up a videocam—"

"I heard. Bobbie called in full-blown hysterics. Did you know that unauthorized filming of individuals is a burglary charge?"

"I do now."

"How did you hear about Brent so quickly? From Bridget? I guess Bobbie must've called her here and—"

"Actually, it was Brenda who called and told me, a short while ago."

"Brenda?" Cade gaped at him. "Why would Brenda call you?"

"It seems I'm her new best friend." Noah shrugged nonchalantly, but Cade noticed that the other man did not meet his eyes.

He felt an ominous stirring. "How did that happen? And

when?”

Noah shrugged again and gazed intently at the lake view, as if bent on observing every rise and swell of the water. “I saw her at The Corner Grill about three weeks ago and we ended up having coffee there after her shift ended. I’ve heard from her almost every day since. She either phones or drops by my place with a question or with something she’s whipped up in the kitchen. She’s, uh, a pretty good cook.”

“You’ve been seeing her every day for nearly a month?” Cade’s voice rose in apprehension.

“Nothing’s happened between us. As I said, we’re just friends.”

“You sound sorry about that. Does that mean you’re thinking about—taking things further with her? God, man, be careful!”

“You sound so alarmed, like I’m about to take a dive into a vat of Agent Orange.” Noah grinned, clearly amused. “What are you worried about, that Brenda is set on having her wicked way with me?”

“I’m worried because she is Brenda Brennan, who is manipulative and conniving and the first woman I’ve heard you mention since Janice left Port McClain two and a half years ago.”

“I’ve spent the past two and a half years exactly the way you have, working sixteen-hour days to implement our ideas and bring this company to the industry’s cutting edge.” Noah was defensive. “I haven’t been pining over Janice or avoiding women, I’ve been focusing all my attention and energy on BrenCo.”

Cade laid a hand on Noah's shoulder. "Look, I know how hard you took the divorce and I don't want to see you get mixed up with a—"

"I appreciate your concern, but we're not nineteen anymore, Cade, you don't have to look out for me. I've been married and divorced, remember? You've done neither. Doesn't that make me the more experienced one? The one who should be giving the advice?"

"No. Not when Brenda Brennan is involved." Or any other woman, Cade added silently.

Despite Noah's marriage and divorce, Cade believed his friend to be as naive about women as he'd been during their college years. Back then Cade, a worldly army brat with a wealth of experience, had felt protective toward the shy, brilliant Noah who'd led a quiet sheltered life of privilege and private schools. He still felt that way.

Cade decided that now was not the time to remind Noah how he'd advised him against marrying Janice in the first place, that he had seen the divorce coming on their wedding day when he'd been cast as best man and had to pretend to be happy for the woefully mismatched pair.

"Cade, I know you're the expert on the Brennans but you're wrong about Brenda," Noah exclaimed earnestly. "I've gotten to know her pretty well these past few weeks. She is bright and sensitive and vulnerable."

"I've never seen that side of her," Cade muttered sardonically.

Lord, what a day this was turning into! First, he'd been blindsided by his attraction to Kylie Brennan, now he was faced with the alarming revelation that his best friend and the number two man at BrenCo was on the verge of being bamboozled by Brenda Brennan.

His eyes flicked to his desk calendar and he noted the date for the first time that day. March 15. "Beware the Ides of March," he quoted grimly. "An applicable bit of advice."

"Don't let the mayor hear you say that. Not on the day we're to convince him that supporting our zoning permit to build an infectious waste autoclave is a great idea." Chuckling, Noah glanced at his watch. "And speaking of the mayor, if we don't leave now, we'll be late for our meeting with him. A bad move. You know how His Honor reveres punctuality."

Cade stifled the urge to issue one more warning about the insidious wiles of Brenda Brennan. Noah didn't want to hear it, he'd made that clear. Worse, Cade found himself challenging his own expertise in matters dealing with the opposite sex. His previously resolute confidence was not quite so resolute.

This morning's encounter with Kylie Brennan had done that to him. He'd always considered himself to be unshakable, but she shook him up, all right. She just might be the most dangerous Brennan of all—smart and alluring and a completely unknown entity. He vowed to be on his guard—on full-alert status!—during their next encounter.

It worried him that he was already looking forward to it.

The old Brennan homestead was a stately though dilapidated Victorian-style house built in the late 1800s in Port McClain's oldest neighborhood. The spacious lots were landscaped with towering trees, tall hedges and flower gardens. Gene had bought the house for his parents years ago and lived there with them until they died, then stayed on alone until his own death last year.

Wearing jeans, boots and a thick cerulean blue sweater, Kylie sat on a weather-beaten wooden glider on the deep front porch. She'd driven her rental car to the house to oversee the flurry of activity initiated by her morning phone calls.

She stared out at the long, spacious front yard extending to the deserted tree-lined street and remembered summer visits when her grandparents were alive, when the yard was green and bright with color from Grandma's prized gardens. Now it looked as desolate and untended as the inside of the house, where currently a trio of maids from the cleaning service were working hard to make the place livable once again.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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