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AMERICAN *Romance*®

# HIGH-SOCIETY BACHELOR

Krista Thoren



# **Krista Thoren**

## **High-Society Bachelor**

### **Аннотация**

His Blue-Chip BrideEveryone in their tiny town was convinced that Deborah Clark and Cameron Lyle were the perfect couple. Everyone but Deborah and Cameron, of course. She was the perky girl next door who planned children's parties. And this serious-minded businessman was the town's most eligible bachelor, accustomed to wining and dining glamorous women. So when these total opposites concocted the ideal solution to outwit the town's matchmakers, they quickly found themselves in way over their heads. Cameron had always thought of Deborah as a sweet girl, but now there was no mistaking the soul-searing heat that flared between them. Could this high-society bachelor convince her that the only solution was...a trip to the altar?

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"I'd like to clarify a couple of points," Cam said, clearing his throat

He'd never realized how intimate his study could be. Maybe because he didn't usually bring a woman into it in the wee hours. Especially not a woman enjoying chocolate torte the way Deborah was. She didn't merely eat it. She savored it. Occasionally her eyes closed and an expression of pure bliss spread over her features.

"I would, too." Deborah seemed in no hurry, though. She took another bite of her cake. Hypnotized, Cam stared at her mouth. Right from the beginning, he'd noticed she had really great lips. Tonight they were off-the-scale great.

"But you go first." With a delicate sweep of her tongue, Deborah licked chocolate off her full lower lip.

Cam stifled a groan. How was he supposed to get this woman out of his thoughts when she sat there eating cake like...like...that?

This was impossible.

Dear Reader,

Happy New Year! Harlequin American Romance is starting the year off with an irresistible lineup of four great books, beginning with the latest installment in the MAITLAND MATERNITY: TRIPLETS, QUADS & QUINTS series. In Quadruplets on the Doorstep by Tina Leonard, a handsome bachelor proposes a marriage of convenience to a lovely nurse for the sake of four abandoned babies.

In Mindy Neff's Preacher's In-Name-Only Wife, another wonderful book in her BACHELORS OF SHOTGUN RIDGE series, a woman must marry to secure her inheritance, but she hadn't counted on being an instant wife and mother when her new husband unexpectedly receives custody of an orphaned baby. Next, a brooding loner captivates a pregnant single mom in Pregnant and Incognito by Pamela Browning. These opposites have nothing in common—except an intense attraction that neither is strong enough to deny. Finally, Krista Thoren makes her Harlequin American Romance debut with High-Society Bachelor, in which a successful businessman and a pretty party planner decide to outsmart their small town's matchmakers by pretending to date.

Enjoy them all—and don't forget to come back again next month when a special three-in-one volume, The McCallum Quintuplets, featuring New York Times bestselling author Kasey Michaels, Mindy Neff and Mary Anne Wilson is waiting for you.

Wishing you happy reading,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin American Romance

High-Society Bachelor

Krista Thoren



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

For Vikki Thoren

Wonderful person, loving sister, classy lady.

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Krista Thoren grew up in Indiana. After ten years of college teaching, she now stays home with her toddler. She writes whenever possible, especially if the alternative is cleaning. Krista has too many hobbies and not nearly enough time. She lives near Chicago with her husband and daughter.

# Books by Krista Thoren

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

908—HIGH-SOCIETY BACHELOR

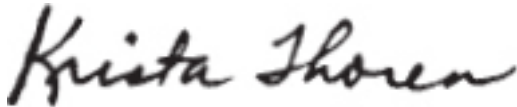
Dear Reader,

I'm happy to be writing for Harlequin American Romance. As both reader and writer, I enjoy books that feature a strong sense of community. In High-Society Bachelor, shop owners are friendly and loyal. Still, Deborah Clark and Cameron Lyle find that the community grapevine is more active than they'd like!

The idea for this book came largely from classic movies featuring elegant parties and sophisticated heroes. But I also wondered what would happen when a compassionate white lie backfired. My love of humor and fondness for cats combined to produce Libby, a cat with personality to spare.

I loved writing High-Society Bachelor, and I hope you'll have a great time reading it.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Krista Thoren". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Krista" and "Thoren" being capitalized and prominent.



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# Chapter One

"I expected more of a welcome from my girlfriend."

Deborah Clark stared at the man who leaned with nonchalant grace against the corridor wall outside her apartment. During the three months since she'd moved in above his office, Cameron Lyle had said about two dozen words to her, most of them brusque. Lofty and remote, that was him. Like Mount Everest, only not as warm.

And now he was making no sense.

"Your what?"

Then she remembered and drew in a sharp breath. Uh-oh. Her throat felt like something big and sharp had lodged in it.

Now she knew why he was here. This time it wasn't because her music was too loud, her cat too curious or her mail too abundant. No, this time it really was her fault.

The question was, how had he found out?

He crossed his arms and fixed a sharp green gaze on her. "My girlfriend." His polite tone and neutral expression gave her no clues as to his mood. His eyes showed a flicker of something that, in anyone else, she might have interpreted as humor. But in her admittedly limited experience of this man, he'd shown no signs of having a sense of humor. Maybe someone as good-looking and rich as he was never got the chance to develop one.

Deborah forced her thoughts to a halt. "I can explain the whole

thing,” she said in her most cheerful tone.

“You can?” He gave her that intense stare again, the one that always made both her brain and her mouth run amok. Which was silly, since it wasn’t as if she cared what he thought of her. Wealthy man-about-town types didn’t appeal to her.

Deborah nodded. “Yes. It’s simple, really. In fact, you wouldn’t believe how simple it is.” Right, as in simpleminded. She couldn’t believe it herself.

“Are you going to let me come in?” It wasn’t really a question. At that moment, as if to underline his demand, the door downstairs opened, sending an icy blast of January air up the stairway.

“Come in?” She didn’t want him in her apartment. He was too big, too...male. But under the circumstances, she didn’t have much choice. “Well, I guess so, if it’s necessary. But I’m sure we can settle this very quickly, without taking too much of your time.” Or hers. She was running a tight deadline on arrangements for the Tyler twins’ birthday party, and their mother was not a calm woman.

“We need to talk.” He brushed past her, and with his six-foot-plus frame inside it, her apartment immediately shrank to shoebox size. His aftershave smelled fresh and piney.

“Talk?” Deborah took a breath and forced herself not to say anything else for five seconds. She wasn’t letting any man, especially one in pinstripes, turn her into a parrot. The problem was, Cameron Lyle made every cell in her body go haywire. He

always did. He'd stand and look at her without saying anything at all. He didn't smile much, either. The man should learn how to smile. It was, after all, a very natural thing to do, and it put people at ease.

But Cameron Lyle wouldn't know anything about that. And if he did, the idea of putting people at ease probably wouldn't be a selling point.

Deborah pointed to the couch. "Have a seat. Are you allergic to cats?"

He raised one dark brow. Now that he did well. It was obvious that he disapproved of not only her music, but practically everything else about her, too. She'd gotten a lot of brow action from him over the past three months. He had strong, very masculine brows to go with a strong, very masculine face. And his jaw was way more aggressive than any jaw she would consider going out with.

Deborah grimaced. She didn't want to guess where that thought had come from. It wasn't as if she even liked the man, for heaven's sake. He was the only person she knew who consistently challenged her natural optimism and good humor.

Still, he had to have a good side to him somewhere. After all, he attracted an amazing number of women. How many times had she gone downstairs to chat with his assistant, Barb, and found some glamorous woman waiting for him?

"No," said Cameron finally, settling himself onto her couch. Deborah sat down in the armchair opposite the sofa and

tried to remember what he was saying no about. “Cat hair,” she explained after a moment. “Cat dander, to be more accurate. Libby sheds, and the hair doesn’t always vacuum up completely. So it’s a good thing you’re not allergic. Now, let me tell you how this boyfriend-girlfriend thing came about.” She took a long, steadying breath. “Actually, I never used the word boyfriend to Marilyn. I just said I’d been seeing someone, and she asked who, and I said you.”

“I see.”

What that meant, and what exactly he saw, was a mystery to Deborah. His face gave nothing away. But based on all her other encounters with Cameron Lyle, disapproval had to figure in there somewhere.

“Strictly speaking, I do see you from time to time,” she pointed out, trying not to sound as defensive as she felt. “But of course Marilyn drew her own conclusions.” Which I did nothing to correct.

She wanted to clear her throat, but that would make her sound as nervous as she was. Instead she traced a pattern on the arm of her chair. So much for telling herself that Cameron would never find out about her little misrepresentation, and that even if he did, he dated so many women he wouldn’t notice one more in the crowd.

Wrong on both counts.

Deborah stifled a sigh. It would be nice if he would stop looking at her as if she were a zoo exhibit. His gaze was too

intense. It made her feel completely off-balance. Plus, using the word “boyfriend” in connection with the man seated opposite her went beyond weird. Not only were they an unlikely pair, but there was nothing boyish about him. He was all lean muscle and hard edges.

In short, all man.

Which, of course, she had noticed even when she had been engaged to Marilyn’s son, Mark.

His gaze held steady on her face. “I’ll admit I’m curious as to why you didn’t use your fiancé if you needed to claim a boyfriend. I’d have thought he would be the ultimate in convenience.”

Deborah blinked. Aside from those two sentences being the longest ones he’d ever sent in her direction, he was apparently the only person in this little corner of Indianapolis who hadn’t heard the news.

The interest her broken engagement had generated in Tulip Tree Square had taken Deborah totally by surprise, but as her friend Ann had pointed out, their small community of shop owners was closely knit, and people had to talk about something. If they didn’t care about sports, then love lives were a decent alternative.

Tulip Tree Square needed more sports fans.

“I don’t have a fiancé,” Deborah said.

His brows shot up, but not in a supercilious way this time. He looked genuinely surprised. In his eyes she saw a quick flash

of something else, too, something undefinable, before his gaze dropped to her left hand. For the first time since her breakup, Deborah was acutely conscious of her bare ring finger.

“No fiancé,” he murmured.

“Right. Not anymore. Mark broke it off a month ago. And his mother was so concerned about me that I had to say something to reassure her. We had lunch together, except she wasn’t eating any of hers, and she badly needs to get her strength back after her surgery—”

Deborah stopped. She simply had to control herself. She had to ignore his intense eyes and her own embarrassment and remember that this man didn’t care two hoots about Marilyn not eating any of her roast beef au jus sandwich. Or that she’d been like an extra mother to Deborah for years. There wasn’t much Deborah wouldn’t do for Marilyn. A little white lie hadn’t seemed too terrible if it brought her peace of mind.

“His mother. I suppose that would be Marilyn Snyder,” observed the lofty Mr. Lyle.

“Right.” Her own mother’s best friend. Now that her mom had remarried and moved to Florida, it was up to Deborah to keep an affectionate eye on Marilyn during her convalescence. “You know her, obviously,” Deborah added.

“Only slightly. Committee work.”

She nodded. “Well anyway, Marilyn had an emergency appendectomy a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, her appendix exploded on the operating table, and the infection got really

nasty.”

He winced. “I see.” He looked like he wished he didn’t. “I had no idea she had a son. She didn’t mention him to me at all during our conversation.”

Deborah lifted one shoulder. “Well, since she thinks you’re my new boyfriend—which, as I’ll repeat, is not what I told her—she probably decided against mentioning an ex-fiancé. Besides, Marilyn hasn’t been too thrilled with Mark lately.”

That was an understatement. When Mark had broken off their engagement, his mother had been crushed. Deborah’s mother hadn’t turned any handsprings, either, because she and Marilyn had decided years ago that Deborah and Mark would make a perfect couple. The two mothers had been a lot more upset about the breakup than Deborah had been. Which, in the end, had told them all a lot.

She and Mark were both lucky to have escaped marriage. After all, Mark couldn’t even decide which graduate degree to go for. He was obviously not ready to commit to any woman. And in the days following their breakup, Deborah had realized he wasn’t the man for her.

All things considered, the two of them were lucky their mothers had given up gracefully.

But there was no point in going into details. Even if Cameron Lyle were interested, which he wouldn’t be, it was none of his business.

“Marilyn’s clearly a big fan of yours,” he said. “Wanted to let



me know how happy she is that you're having some fun these days."

Deborah stifled a groan. Marilyn, sweetheart that she was, had said those very words to Deborah, but somehow, coming from beautifully chiseled masculine lips, they sounded a lot less innocent.

"So tell me," he said. "Exactly what kind of fun are we having?"

She stared at the strong curve of his mouth. It tilted up a smidgen at the corners. Not a smile, but it wasn't a frown, either, so apparently he wasn't mad at her. He sounded curious, more than anything else. Curious and intrigued. Deborah met his interested stare and felt her pulse pick up speed.

"Well?" he prompted. "Are we talking generic, G-rated fun, here? Or a more interesting kind of fun?"

All sorts of images popped into her head, and not a single one was G-rated. Her face felt hot. "I don't think I specified," she muttered.

"I see." He watched her. "She also wanted to make sure I appreciated you."

Oh, boy. What in the world had he said to that? Maybe nothing. Hopefully nothing. After all, this was not a man who chatted.

His eyes held a gleam. "I assured her I appreciate you very much."

Deborah's pulse thudded faster still, but she ignored it.

Probably just shock. Cameron Lyle obviously wasn't himself today, but tomorrow he'd give her the familiar stiff nod and everything would be back to normal. This was no time to be thinking that he looked like a human being this afternoon. A very attractive man, in fact, in spite of the ultraconservative and downright boring three-piece navy pinstriped suit he was wearing.

"After all," he continued, "it was clear that you were the one who told her we were involved, so I decided you must have a reason for this idiocy."

Scratch that last thought. He was not a human being.

Deborah counted to ten. He had helped her out by not giving her away to Marilyn. So what if Mr. High Society was a snob and considered the idea of dating her ridiculous? She wasn't lining up to go out with him and his jaw, either.

He still watched her closely. "Why did you pick me?"

"I didn't pick you!" She took a calming breath. "Well, I picked your name, that's true. But only because Marilyn wanted to know who the guy was. Like I said, at first I just told her I was seeing somebody. You know, somebody tall, dark and handsome." Deborah felt her cheeks warm. Why had she said that?

A skeptical little smile appeared at the corners of his lips. "And then my name popped into your head?"

"No." She shifted. "Well, yes, actually, it did. Why shouldn't it? I pass by your sign downstairs at least six times a day.

Cameron Lyle, M.B.A., Financial Consultant.” And, of course, he fit the tall, dark and handsome description, although handsome was too bland a word to describe his aggressively attractive face and body.

However, his looks were completely irrelevant. She had not been thinking of Cameron Lyle, the man. In fact, she hadn’t been thinking at all, because otherwise she’d have realized that Marilyn, a businesswoman herself, would have heard of him. And even though she’d never figured Marilyn would say anything, using his name had been dumb.

But then, impulses often turned out to be dumb, which was why she was trying to stop having them.

He leaned forward, his gaze sweeping over her face and body in leisurely passes. “You know, you should have dropped me a few hints. Why play games? We’re both free, and I like admiration as much as the next guy. I’m sure we could arrange something—”

“Arrange something? I don’t want—” Deborah saw his face and stopped. The crinkles around his dark green eyes gave him away, despite his deadpan expression.

He was laughing at her.

With anyone else, she’d have gotten a chuckle out of it, too. She liked to laugh, and she appreciated a good joke, even when it was on her.

But besides laughing at her, Mr. High Society was patronizing her. Every time he talked to her, she read dismissal in his eyes.

It was all too obvious he saw her as an unsophisticated and naïve girl, instead of as the mature woman she really was.

“Very amusing,” she muttered. It just went to show he wasn’t always humorless and unfriendly. Sometimes he was humorless, unfriendly and sarcastic.

Deborah plucked a piece of lint from her royal blue leggings. Well, that wasn’t quite true. Okay, so the man did have a sense of humor. She could acknowledge that fact, even though the discovery of it completely stunned her and his humor was unkind and came at her expense.

Still, Cameron Lyle should be careful, because an even less sophisticated woman than she was might think he’d been flirting with her just now. Which of course he hadn’t been. After all, this was the man who drove a sleek, expensive car and had recently made Indianapolis Living’s “Most Eligible Bachelors” list. Not that she read columns like those, but from the moment she’d moved into the apartment directly over his large office, she’d gotten an earful from several interested parties in Tulip Tree Square, all of them female.

So she knew enough about Cameron Lyle’s love life to realize that she was the total opposite of the women he dated. They were all sophisticated and impeccably stylish. Probably petite, too, and ultrafeminine.

All things she would never be. Things she would never want to be.

Deborah got up from her chair. “So that’s the situation. A

bit of a mess, I know, but it's only temporary. I apologize for any inconvenience..." She let her sentence trail off because it sounded uncomfortably like a renovation notice in a department store.

His dark head tilted. "I accept your apology, but that's not the main reason I came to talk to you."

"It isn't?" How could they have anything else to talk about? They had nothing in common. He spent his days in stiff business suits doing boring paperwork while she spent hers in comfy leggings planning cheerful kids' parties. In the evenings he ate elegant catered meals and escorted beautiful women to social engagements while she ate frozen dinners and read.

Lengthy, deep conversations between the two of them were not even a remote possibility.

"I want to hire you," he said.

Deborah stared. For a moment, that was all she could do, because although a variety of thoughts leaped into her head every time she saw the handsome and remote Mr. Lyle, none of those thoughts had anything to do with dinosaur birthday cakes, pizza parties or clowns.

He had to be kidding.

On the other hand, he looked serious, like someone ready to talk business. And it wasn't entirely impossible that he could need her company's services.

Even confirmed bachelors had nieces and nephews.

Deborah cleared her throat. "You want to hire me? To

organize a party?”

“Yes.”

She considered the idea, turning it around in her mind with the caution of someone tasting a food of unknown character. The difference was that in this case, she had enough knowledge to make her suspect that planning a party for Cameron Lyle would be a mistake. Accepting him as a client was a risk she shouldn't take. After all, sooner or later she'd have to say something to him. Then he'd give her one of those brusque, stuck-up, disapproving replies, and she would tell him to go soak his haughty head, and then—

“Will you do it?” he asked, saving her imagination any more work.

She opened her mouth to say “no” and then remembered that Libby's vet bill was due in less than two weeks. “Maybe. I'd need some details first.” Deborah snagged a pen and some paper from the coffee table and gave him her best businesslike voice. “How old are the children?”

He frowned. “The children? There aren't—”

“Age group is the biggest factor, you know. It determines everything, from food to games. After all, we can't have twelve-year-olds playing pin the tail on the donkey, can we?” Mentally Deborah winced. She sounded like a geriatric nurse. And one look at his face told her he was completely lost.

“Is there a wide age range?” she asked. Actually, that was only a minor problem, but many clients were stumped by it.

He chuckled, and Deborah stared. She hadn't been positive the guy ever laughed, and she would never have guessed he could produce such an attractive sound. Deep, rich and melodic, it made her want to join in, even though she had no idea what was funny.

"Very wide," he agreed. "But I'm not hiring you for a kids' party."

Deborah frowned. "You're not? But that's what I do. Well, except for a few weddings—" She drew in a sharp breath and almost choked. "You're hiring me to plan your wedding reception?"

Good grief, no one on the block was going to believe this. She couldn't believe it herself, after all the what-a-hunk-but-he's-allergic-to-marriage sighing and sobbing she'd heard since she moved in. Just how everyone knew, or thought they knew, that he'd never marry was a mystery to her. Had he taken out a billboard ad?

More to the point, how had he sneaked a fiancée past the grapevine groupies?

"No, no," Cameron Lyle said, with a haste that made her want to laugh. "No reception. No wedding. I'm not getting married." He looked horrified, as if they were discussing a fatal disease.

Deborah felt a smile tug at the corners of her lips. Besides amusement, there was relief, pure and simple. With the exception of one last booking in March, and her own wedding, sometime in the distant future when she was very, very positive

that her fiancé wasn't going to jilt her, she hoped to plan no more weddings as long as she lived.

"Fine, you're not getting married," she agreed. "And you're not having a kids' party. So what kind of event are we talking about?"

"A dinner party. A dinner dance, in fact. January thirtieth, seven-thirty. Sixty people, mostly business acquaintances." He ticked off the details with the air of someone who knew what he was doing and was never indecisive. "Something simple but elegant. Hors d'oeuvre, buffet service, dessert trays. Modern but conservative décor, probably silver and burgundy."

Deborah blinked. "And you want me to plan the event?" Assuming there was any planning left to be done.

"Right. Is there a problem with that?" he asked.

She thought about it. "Probably not." He had just handed her a golden opportunity, because this party sounded like exactly the type of event she wanted to specialize in. And since she'd been trying, so far unsuccessfully, to take her business in that direction, she shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. Still...

"Why?" Deborah asked, unable to stop herself. "Why are you asking me, I mean?"

For a second he looked like he was going to say something, but then he raised a brow instead. "Why shouldn't I?"

She could think of several reasons. Every time they met she got the impression he thought she was too talkative, too casual, too flippant, too unsophisticated and a whole lot of other toos. Of



course, she herself knew that wasn't true, but then she wasn't him—a certified Type A personality who took himself and life way too seriously. Compared to him, she was downright frivolous.

“You don't know my work,” Deborah pointed out. “For all you know, my event décor features plastic fruit, fringed table cloths and doilies.”

“You don't seem like the doily type,” he said. “In any case, I'll have final approval over everything.”

Not exactly a strong vote of confidence. But it didn't matter. She really couldn't afford to turn down this opportunity.

“Okay, I'll do it,” Deborah said. She told him her fee percentage and, when he nodded, she added, “Once we hash out the details, I'll write you up a proposal. I've also got a contract we can fill out.”

“Good.” He looked satisfied rather than surprised, but before Deborah could decide whether or not she was annoyed that he'd apparently been so sure she would be available to plan the event, he held up a hand. “Oh, yes. I'll need one other thing.”

“What's that?” she asked.

“A hostess for my party.”

Deborah frowned. “That's not part of the normal service.”

“I realize that, but you can do it for me, can't you?” He gave her a confident smile that told her he fully expected her to agree.

Deborah eyed him without enthusiasm. She should have known that coming to a business agreement with this man wouldn't be easy. Most clients were more than satisfied if she

threw in a free cake or pizza with the deal, but not him. Oh, no. Nothing so simple for him. He expected her to come up with a hostess for his party. Not an easy task.

And his confident smile made her want to grit her teeth. He probably used that smile on women all the time. It probably worked, too.

Well, it wouldn't work on her.

"I can throw in a server with the deal, but that's the best I can do," she told him finally.

He gave her a small, amused smile. "I'm not asking for this as a freebie in a business negotiation. I'm asking for it because you owe me a favor."

Deborah looked up at him. He had her there. "Yes, I suppose I do. Okay, I'll find you a hostess—"

"No." He shook his head. "I told you, this isn't a business issue. I'm asking for a personal favor."

Deborah met his gaze and then, suddenly, light dawned. She felt herself flush. He must think she was a complete idiot to be so slow catching on. Her only excuse was that this had to be the worst idea she'd heard in a long time.

"Wait a minute. You're not suggesting I..." She couldn't finish. The thought was too awful.

"Yes, I am," said Cameron Lyle. "I want you to be my hostess."

## Chapter Two

Deborah did not look happy. That fact alone was noteworthy, since Cameron hadn't seen her any other way in the short time he'd known her.

During that time she'd met each of his complaints with a cheerful calm and a chatty reply that kept him off-balance. Amused, too, in spite of his irritation. Even during the past month, when she'd apparently been recovering from her fiancé's rejection, Cam would never have guessed it by seeing or talking to her. When their paths crossed, she was often deep in conversation with a neighbor, gesturing with an enthusiasm that echoed in her lively blue eyes. She always seemed about to smile.

Except for right now. Right now she looked like she'd rather be doing anything else than having this conversation.

"No." She shoved a hand through her thick blond hair. "I can't be your hostess."

Cam blinked. He wasn't prepared for a refusal at all, let alone such an abrupt one. What was the matter with her?

He gave a mental shrug. He couldn't afford to wonder what Deborah's problem was. He needed her, and she owed him her cooperation. Simple as that.

"This works out well," Cam said, ignoring her last statement. "I thought I was going to have to go without a hostess for my party, but that little problem is solved now that I've suddenly

acquired a girlfriend.” He put emphasis on the last few words.

Her expression told him she’d gotten his point, but Deborah shook her head. “I can’t be your hostess,” she repeated. “And I can’t imagine why you’d want me to, anyway, since it’s obvious you don’t approve of me.” Her gaze met his squarely, daring him to deny it.

Cam frowned. “What are you talking about?”

She snorted. “Frowns just like the one you’re wearing now, that’s what I’m talking about. I know disapproval when I see it, and that’s about all I’ve seen from you, ever since I met you.”

Cam stared at her. She was refreshingly honest. He ought to be able to return her honesty. He wanted to. But what could he say? Yeah, you’re right. I sure as hell disapproved of that engagement ring you were wearing. And I still disapprove of the ten years, minimum, difference in our ages.

No, he couldn’t say that. She would think he was chasing her, which couldn’t be further from the truth. After all, even without the age gap they were completely incompatible. And yet he was relieved—happy, even—to see the last of that damned ring.

He couldn’t explain what he didn’t understand himself.

Cam settled for a small slice of the truth. “That wasn’t disapproval. It was plain bad temper, and I’ve been meaning to apologize for it. Let’s just say something was bothering me and leave it at that.”

She looked stunned. Her eyes were wide, almost swallowing up her extremely innocent-looking face. “Okay,” she said finally.

After another long pause she added, "But I still can't be your hostess." This time her voice held some regret.

"Yes, you can. Helping me out is the least you can do." He fixed her with a long stare. "You owe me."

She closed her eyes.

"Consider it a routine payment of a debt," he advised, watching despair fill her expressive features. He smiled. Talk about melodrama. She had an obvious flair for it. And he should know, because he'd had enough drama from women to last him a lifetime.

"I don't get it." She opened her eyes again and gave him a look that was both exasperated and uncomprehending. "You've got tons of women to choose from. Why would you want me to hostess your party? People will think we're...you know...together." She waved a hand, making her aversion to the idea clear. But then she must have realized her response wasn't flattering, because her cheeks pinkened.

"Like Marilyn does, for instance?" Cam asked with exaggerated politeness.

She shot him a quelling look. "I told you, that was a spur-of-the-moment impulse. One little slip doesn't justify a larger deception. Anyway, as you yourself pointed out, the idea of us as a couple is implausible and idiotic."

"I didn't say it was implausible," he argued. He wouldn't have said that, because it wasn't. Plenty of guys dated much younger girls. He just wasn't one of them.

“And the only reason we find ourselves in an idiotic situation is that you didn’t give me a heads-up. You’re lucky I didn’t blow it,” Cam told her. In fact, he’d come close to it. But he’d recovered in time. Stunned as he was, he’d also found himself more intrigued than he’d been in a long time.

Much as he hated to admit it, he’d jumped at the excuse to go challenge her for an explanation.

Deborah’s head was bent as she examined her nails, which were perfectly groomed. Unvarnished and natural, like the girl herself. Then she looked up again. “You’re right. Thanks for not giving me away.”

“You’re welcome.” Cam eyed her mouth. She had a full lower lip that contributed a hint of sensuality to her fresh, girl-next-door good looks. He dragged his gaze away. She didn’t seem exactly crushed about her broken engagement. Was that another example of her refusal to take anything in life seriously? Or was it only pretense, an attempt at salvaging her pride? Either explanation seemed plausible, but only one explained the story she’d told Marilyn.

“For what it’s worth, I understand why you lied about having a boyfriend,” Cam told her.

She grimaced. “I prefer the word fibbed.”

“Fine. I know why you fibbed.”

She sent him a wary look that didn’t quite come off on a face as open and friendly as hers. “You do?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “Her son ditched you and you looked

for a face-saver. It's a natural enough response. Egos are fragile things."

That earned him a scowl that looked even stranger on her face. "First off, Mark did not 'ditch' me, at least not the way you make it sound. He's too civilized for that. Second, my ego is sturdy enough, thank you very much. As I said, I was trying to put Marilyn's mind to rest."

Irritated that she wouldn't come clean with him, Cam shot her a skeptical look. "Your ex-fiancé's mother? Uh-huh. I'm sure the fact that what's-hisname, your ex, would hear about your new boyfriend had nothing to do with it." Why had he said that? He felt ridiculous, as if they were college kids arguing over Sunday night pizza.

He, at least, had left his college days far behind.

"That's right, it had absolutely nothing to do with it." She looked like she actually believed what she was saying. Her deep blue eyes were wide and indignant. Truthful.

"It doesn't matter," Cam said finally. "You're better off without him, anyway. Don't the surveys say single women are happier than married women?" Barb kept up on all the surveys, and she didn't believe in sparing him any of the good news. The rest of the survey had claimed that married men were happier than single men.

He could still hear the triumph in Barb's voice, but Cam knew the survey was wrong on that point. It was wrong for the simple reason that men were biologically predisposed to prefer variety.

They had a natural instinct to run from entanglement. Marriage was only for those who'd lost the energy to run.

He planned to stay energetic for life.

Besides, he'd seen no evidence of marriage producing long-term happiness for either men or women. At best they tolerated each other and at worst, they ended up in bitter custody battles over children who could only sit there in misery, wanting to be anywhere but there, in the middle of all the shouting.

The phone rang. When Deborah excused herself to go get it, Cam found himself disappointed. Based on her track record, her facial expression and her long silence, he figured she'd probably had something memorable to say. And now he'd miss it. His encounters with Deborah always left him strangely invigorated, as if he were a newly revved-up engine.

Cam took advantage of her absence to glance around her living room. Except for the couch he was sitting on, the furniture was wicker, which wasn't a favorite of his. It looked okay in this room, though, especially combined with lots of plants and a collection of brightly colored pillows. Two end tables painted with funky designs flanked the couch. The scarcity of furniture made him suspect that Deborah's apartment had been furnished on a tight budget. But she'd done a creative job of it. The best features of the room were the large stone fireplace and the hardwood floors.

He could hear Deborah's voice, a distant murmur as she talked on the phone in the kitchen. She had a clear, pleasant voice that



suited her. Books and other collectibles told a lot about a person, so he got up and went over to look at her bookshelves.

She had political thrillers, which was a surprise. He recognized a couple of his own favorite authors. A few mystery novels, some romantic comedies and a variety of nonfiction titles rounded out her reading collection. There were several photographs of a teenage Deborah with another girl. Her sister? Probably, judging by the family resemblance. Nearby was another photo of a woman who had to be her mother. There was no evidence of her father.

Cam had just put the silver-framed photo down when Deborah strode back into the room, a tablet of paper in hand.

He liked the way she moved. It was one of the first things he'd noticed about her. She had a carefree, swingy kind of walk and the height to carry it off gracefully. She had to be five feet ten or so, with a slender, athletic build. Curves in all the right places. Dressed more classically, she would look elegant, but even in artsy clothes she was striking. Her bright blue tunic sweater and leggings accentuated her mile-long legs.

Even though Deborah Clark was way too young for him, he enjoyed looking at her. As he'd assured himself several times, there was nothing wrong with that. But it bothered him a little to realize that he especially enjoyed looking at her now that he didn't have to remind himself she was engaged, and he didn't have to feel the familiar and illogical surge of irritation that the reminder always carried with it.

The fact was that right from the beginning, he'd found it all too easy to watch Deborah. Her shapely body and streaky blond hair were eye-catching enough, but the lively intelligence in her eyes and the humor in her expression riveted his attention. Looking at her almost made him forget her flippant attitude, extreme chattiness and appalling taste in music. One thing was for sure: He would not be putting her in charge of the string quartet.

In fact, he'd have to keep her on a tight leash with every aspect of the party planning, because although she wasn't the doily type, tie-dye might not be far off the mark, and he wasn't a fan of the neo-sixties look. He'd agreed to offer the planning job to Deborah based only on Barb's assurances that the younger woman could produce elegant parties. His motherly administrative assistant had apparently added Deborah Clark to her collection of strays.

Cam watched as Deborah finished jotting something down on her small pad of paper. A favor to Barb was one thing, but he was no martyr. Fortunately, and thanks to Deborah herself, he would reap the added benefit of a hostess for his party. An attractive one, too. Deborah might not fit his image of the ideal girlfriend, but she was easy on the eyes. Most importantly, she wasn't going to make any demands on him during the evening. No expectations, no fits of fury, no sulking episodes. He'd be faced only with a cheerful, chatty female who would help him persuade little Heather Manders to exercise her teenage feminine wiles on someone else.

“Sorry about the interruption,” Deborah said, looking up from her pad of paper. “But I always answer the phone during business hours since my company is home-based.”

He nodded and focused his attention on the small, gray-striped cat that trotted behind her into the living room. “There’s a familiar face,” he commented, aware of mixed feelings. Although highly appealing, the animal reminded him of behavior he’d rather forget.

A month ago, the cat had followed Cam from the hallway into his office, where the feline had promptly curled up on his desk and fallen asleep on a stack of legal documents, wrinkling the top one beyond redemption. When Barb had identified the cat, Cam had stalked upstairs to deliver the interloper, along with a few curt words he shouldn’t have come out with.

It was true that the wrinkled original contract had to be completely redone. It was also true that a robe-clad Deborah had arrived at the door looking damp and tousled, with an innocent gaze that didn’t match her clothing. Still, Cam should have been polite.

Furthermore, he didn’t want to analyze why so much of his annoyance with this girl seemed to have disappeared along with her engagement ring. Nothing about his reaction to her made any sense.

Was she even twenty-one?

“That’s Libby. I think she remembers you, too,” Deborah said now, as the cat twined herself around his ankles before

jumping up into the wicker chair opposite the couch. The feline immediately settled into the cushions and went to sleep.

“Interesting name for a cat,” Cam observed.

“I named her after my roommate,” Deborah explained. “When Beth moved out, I replaced her with a cat. Sort of. Libby talks less and has a lot less energy than Beth, but she’s good company.” She turned back to look at Cam, and the dangly silver earrings she wore swung gently. “Let’s see, where were we?”

“We were discussing the fact that you owe it to me to hostess my party.”

She grimaced. “Okay. I agree I owe you one, but there must be some other way I can pay my debt.” She gave him a hopeful look. “I could walk your dog for a week.”

“I don’t have a dog,” Cam told her.

“Figures,” she muttered.

“Look, why don’t you clue me in?” He steered her over to the couch, and she sat down without protesting. “What’s so terrible about hostessing my party?”

Aside from the fact that being romantically linked with him horrified her so much she’d rather take her chances with a dog. Cam grimaced.

Looking on the bright side, this situation was a nice change from being chased for his money. It was pretty damned ridiculous to be annoyed, especially since she wasn’t an appropriate romantic interest for him, anyway.

For a long moment, it looked like Deborah was going to refuse

to tell him anything. She sat there watching him with her big blue eyes. Finally, she gave a small shrug. “I don’t like parties.”

Cam stared at her. “But you plan parties. That’s what you do for a living.”

“Of course it is. That doesn’t mean I have to like going to them,” she explained, as if her line of reasoning made complete sense. His disbelief must have shown, because she sighed and continued. “I like the idea of parties, and I have fun planning them. I even enjoy the atmosphere if I’m working at an event. But going to a party, not having anything to do there, not knowing what to say—” She shook her head. “It’s the pits.” Her expression was eloquent.

“But you’re so talkative,” Cam protested. “You’re a natural party girl.”

She glared at him.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said.

“Don’t call me a girl, either,” she ordered. “I’m a woman.”

He laughed.

Her glare intensified.

“Fine, you’re a woman,” Cam agreed. “A woman who, every time I see her, is chatting away to someone.” Not to him, of course. She didn’t chat with him. Probably because she didn’t like him. Perfectly logical, of course, since he hadn’t been very nice to her. In any case, she didn’t have to like him. She only had to agree to his plan.

“I like talking one-on-one,” she said. “But I don’t like crowds

of people, all of whom I'm expected to exchange meaningless chitchat with." She gave him a determined look. "So let's just agree that I'd be a disaster as your hostess."

He shook his head. "I don't agree. You'll do fine." She would, too. It was only a party. They didn't need to have anything in common in order to spend one evening together. He just hoped she would manage to look older than sixteen. Maybe he could add it into their contract.

Deborah was staring at him. "Doesn't it bother you at all that I don't want to do this?"

"I can live with it," he assured her.

She muttered something he didn't catch.

"You're the one who started all this," he reminded her again.

"Yes, and I'm also the one who's volunteered to make it up to you in other ways!" she snapped. Then her eyes flickered and her cheeks reddened, and Cameron realized her thoughts were moving along the same lines his were. That surprised him, coming from someone so innocent. She emitted purity like some women did perfume.

"I could wash your car every week for a month," she offered hastily. "You know, that fancy foreign silver thing you love so much."

Wash his car? Cam flinched. He couldn't help it.

"Ooo-kay," she said. "You'd rather die than let me touch your car. Fine." Her tone was light, but a hint of hurt filled her beautiful blue eyes.

Cam sighed. Damn. He was going to have to tell her. He'd hoped to avoid it, although that was probably an unrealistic hope, anyway, since he would need her cooperation.

"Look, I need you to help me with a little problem I have." He wasn't used to fumbling for words like this, but the whole situation was damned awkward. "I've got a business associate whose eighteen-year-old daughter has decided I'm..." He searched for an appropriate expression, didn't find one, and started over. "I mean, for some reason, she finds me—" He stopped. This was hopeless.

Deborah smiled faintly. "She has a crush on you?"

"Yes, that's it." He hoped he didn't look as embarrassed as he felt. "Anyway, since her father's divorced and she usually goes to functions with him, it's a safe bet she'll be at the party." He grimaced. "Heather's very young, and she's had a rough time with her parents' divorce. The last thing I want to do is hurt her feelings. It'll be much easier all around if I'm otherwise attached." Attached to a woman, he wanted to emphasize. But this wasn't the time to point out that Deborah would have to mature herself for his party. He'd cover that later.

"I see," Deborah said slowly. She was looking at him strangely, as if something about him puzzled her. For a long moment she said nothing at all. Finally she asked, "How attached are we talking here? Moderately or intensely?"

Cam stifled a smile at her pink cheeks and the hint of wariness on her face. How would she react if he insisted they needed to

appear intensely involved? The impulse to find out was almost overwhelming, but he ignored it the way he ignored all impulses. “Moderately would do, I’m sure.” Cam examined the resigned expression that now appeared on her face. “You’ll do it?”

Her sigh told him everything he needed to know.



## Chapter Three

“So I agreed to do it,” Deborah said later that afternoon as she sat on a stool in the large kitchen of Sweetness and Light. From behind her came the constant hum of conversation in the gourmet shop’s small café area. Scents of coffee and cinnamon rolls filled the air.

Ann Medford dropped a spoonful of salmon mousse into a pastry casing. “And you want me to do the catering.”

“Exactly.”

“All right, I’ll work you in. But only because it’s you.” Her friend grinned. “And because I’m curious as all get-out about this guy’s house. From what I hear, it’s got a kitchen to die for.”

“How did you hear that?” Deborah sampled a spoonful of the salmon mousse. She was just making conversation, of course. She couldn’t care less about Cameron Lyle’s house.

“I heard it from Stella. You know, up at Rags to Riches. One of her customers designed his kitchen, and she said the whole house was beautiful.” Ann whirled away to check on the pans of cinnamon rolls in the huge steel oven. She was only a few inches over five feet, but energy pulsed from her almost visibly. She was back within seconds. “Stella also said that another of her customers dated him for months, but she was never invited to his house.”

“Hmm.” Deborah dipped another spoon into the mousse.

Ann nodded. "That's exactly what I said. He must be the private type. Hey, Deb, cool it with the mousse, would you? I'm going to have too many shells left over."

"No problem. I can fix that." Deborah reached for a puff pastry shell.

Ann swatted her hand away. "Didn't you eat lunch?" She pushed a strand of her short black hair back into her hair net.

"Sure." Deborah watched her deposit the tray of filled pastry shells on a rack. "If you call a peanut butter sandwich lunch."

"I don't, but you've probably been known to call it dinner, too."

"Only when I serve it with macaroni and cheese." Deborah chuckled. "You look like you're going to faint."

"Philistine," Ann muttered. She plunked a ball of dough down on her pastry board.

"Not at all. I know great food when I eat it. Like these hors d'oeuvre. We'll have to have some of these at the party." She could easily eat a dozen or so right now, but Ann was armed and the rolling pin was marble, so that was a bad idea.

"I wonder why the hunky Mr. Lyle asked you to be his hostess?" Ann mused.

"I already told you why," Deborah said. "I owe him."

"I know what you told me, but that seems like a weird reason to me." Her eyes narrowed. "I bet he has the hots for you."

Deborah laughed. Several customers at the counter looked over in their direction, so she lowered her voice. "Trust me, Cameron Lyle doesn't see me that way at all. He just needs a

hostess and I'm handy." A pushover, too, apparently. One little tale of woe and he had her agreeing in no time flat. Her only excuse was that his apparent compassion for a teenager had caught her by surprise. Who'd have thought the guy was capable of that kind of empathy?

Of course, she hadn't ever pictured him apologizing to her for past rudeness, either. Another stunner.

"Oh, please." Ann sounded exasperated. "As if he couldn't come up with a party hostess on his own. From what we've both heard and seen, Indy's 'Most Eligible Bachelor' has women lining up."

Deborah grimaced. Money and good looks were apparently some women's major criteria. She herself, on the other hand, cared about things like personality. And even though his seemed to have improved today, it still left a lot to be desired. Which was why, even if he did make her heart beat a little faster and her palms tingle, she had nothing to worry about.

He was completely resistible.

"Maybe he's tired of female attention," Deborah suggested. "Maybe the fact that I'm not interested is a plus." After all, he certainly wasn't interested in her. Even though Cameron Lyle apparently didn't actually disapprove of her, it was clear he thought her an irritating and naïve creature. Those qualities made her a perfectly safe candidate to hostess his party. They also should have taken her out of the running for planning his party, but it was obvious he wasn't going to give her free rein, anyway,

so he probably figured he was safe enough.

“Not interested, huh?” Ann gave her a searching look. “You know, Deb, I’m a little worried about you.”

Deborah grinned. “Come off it, Ann.”

“No, really, I’m serious. You’re way too blasé about hostessing this guy’s party. He’s got every woman between sixteen and sixty panting after him, and you’re not interested.”

Ann pulled up a stool for herself and leaned in closer to Deborah. “I could understand it if Mark had broken your heart, but that’s obviously not true. I mean, you moped around for all of two days, and then there you were, Ms. Sunshine again. Which I don’t understand, either.” Her deep gray eyes stared into Deborah’s. “Are you okay? Come on, tell Auntie Ann.”

In spite of her friend’s light tones, her concern was obvious, and Deborah was touched. “I’m fine, Ann. Couldn’t be better.” Well, she could if she didn’t have this hostessing nonsense hanging over her head, but that was a different issue, and she would deal with it.

“Really?” Ann looked dubious.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, when Mark broke off our engagement, I learned a couple of important things. One was that I’d gotten engaged to him mostly to please my mom. I was depressed for a day or so, but I didn’t feel like I’d lost the love of my life. That wasn’t the problem at all.” She drew a breath. “What really got to me was that yet another man in my life had left me.”

“Oh.” Ann’s voice was soft. “That makes sense. Your dad—”

“Yeah.” Deborah swallowed. “There’s no good age to have your father walk out on you, but it sure as heck was no fun at thirteen. And then there was Rick.”

“Rick?” Her friend frowned. “You’ve never mentioned him.”

“True. That’s because I hadn’t thought about him in years, until Mark broke our engagement. Anyway, Rick was my first serious boyfriend. He joined up to fight in the Gulf War and then stayed in the army. He found someone else and sent me a Dear Jane letter.” She could smile about it now, but the teenage Deborah had been devastated.

Ann’s lips tightened. “Jerk. What bad luck.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Deborah agreed. “But I always knew Rick was sold on the armed forces, so if I’d thought about it, I could have predicted he’d leave. As for Mark...” She shook her head. “I realized it wasn’t me, personally, he’d rejected. He just wasn’t ready to get married. And neither was I, at least not to him.”

Ann nodded. “There are much more exciting guys out there. You just have to look a little.” She paused. “And when opportunity knocks, you have to take advantage of it.”

Deborah eyed Ann’s bright smile and knew exactly where her thoughts were heading. “Maybe. If it’s the right opportunity.”

“Exactly.” Ann arranged the dough in several pie dishes. Then she looked up. “You have to admit Cameron Lyle is gorgeous. Plus, according to Stella, he’s very generous with clothes for his

lady friends. You could enjoy his company without taking him seriously. He's probably a lot of fun."

Fun. It wasn't the word Deborah would have used to describe him, even if she'd wanted to dwell on that particular word. Which she didn't. Fun reminded her of the gleam in Cameron's eyes as he asked her what kind they were having.

But she shouldn't be thinking about that, or about any of the various disturbing images that came to mind. She should be thinking only about getting through this party. Afterward, her contact level with him would be back to the usual hello. It would involve no fun at all.

And definitely no R-rated fun.

THE NEXT MORNING, Deborah took her paperwork down to Cameron. When Barb Metzen, his plump, middle-aged assistant, showed her into his office, he was sitting at his massive cherry desk. Today he wore a charcoal suit. Reading glasses perched on his nose. For some reason, they made him look even more attractive. Distinguished, in fact. His dark hair gleamed in the sunlight that slanted through the window.

He smiled at her, and Deborah felt an unwelcome little jolt hit her spine.

"I've got your proposal ready. And I need you to sign the contract." How annoying to find herself rushing into speech. She accepted a chair. "After you look it over, of course."

He ignored the papers. He was looking her over instead, his gaze traveling slowly from her ponytail to her bright floral

sweatshirt to her red leggings and back up again. As usual, the intensity of his green eyes started a slow heat in her middle.

Deborah decided to go on the offensive. "So how come you don't have a hostess for this party?"

He raised a brow. "I do. You're not backing out, are you?"

"I meant from before," she told him. "I don't understand why you're having to come up with someone right now, at the eleventh hour." She should have thought of that right away. She probably would have, too, if she hadn't been so dismayed and generally shaken by his request.

"I did have a hostess," Cameron admitted. "She canceled." He took a few sips from the huge coffee mug on his desk. Then he twirled a pencil, watching it closely. He looked more uncomfortable than she'd ever seen him.

Sudden suspicion hit her. "You mean she ditched you?"

Cameron looked up but said nothing. His gaze wasn't encouraging.

Deborah fought a smile. "She did, didn't she?" It wasn't nice to bait him, but this was too good not to follow up. Besides, what about all the grief Mr. High-and-Mighty had given her? Was still giving her, for that matter?

"Touché." He sent her a wry nod. "Yes, you could say she ditched me."

"Why?"

He looked surprised by her question, and at first she thought he was going to ignore it. Then he shrugged. "I guess she figured

out I meant what I said, and she wasn't going to get what she wanted."

"Which was...?" None of this was any of her business, of course, but his opinion of her was already somewhere between iffy and unfavorable, so she might as well satisfy her curiosity.

"Marriage," Cameron said. Then he cleared his throat and glanced down at the papers she'd brought, as if he'd only just seen them. In cats, that kind of look indicated embarrassment. With this man, who knew?

"So in fact you're the one who broke up with her."

He frowned but didn't answer.

"She's the redhead?" Deborah asked before she could stop herself.

He stared at her.

Her cheeks felt suddenly warm. "I think I saw you with a redhead one time," she mumbled. Why couldn't she learn to keep a lid on it?

"I see. No, that was somebody before her." A hint of red crept into his tanned cheeks.

Deborah nodded. Even if she hadn't been fully aware of his reputation, she wouldn't have needed to ask if he'd been the one to break off that relationship and if so, why. His expression told the whole story. It told her one other thing, loud and clear: This man was a menace to women.

Deborah gave him a long, measuring look. "I get it. You're one of those."



“One of those what?” He frowned again, more vigorously this time. His dark brows almost met over the bridge of his nose. He looked more like the man she’d watched from a safe distance, the man who frowned at the least little thing she said or did.

Too bad, because yesterday he’d been an actual human being, and aside from dumping women right and left, he’d seemed almost likeable.

“You know, if you’re not careful, all that frowning is going to give you deep wrinkles,” Deborah warned. She had no idea if he was the type to worry about wrinkles, but in any case, the look on his face was priceless.

“You should smile more,” she told him. “Frowning isn’t good for you, but smiling is. Did you know that? Smiling makes you feel happier, which lowers your stress level and keeps your heart healthier. In fact—”

“What am I one of?” he demanded again, his face a strange mixture of affront, curiosity and reluctance, as if he was asking the question against his better judgment.

Deborah shrugged. “Well, I don’t know this for sure, of course. It’s just a guess. But it seems to me like you’re one of those afraid-to-make-a-commitment guys.” Thanks to Mark, she could now see one coming a mile away.

His frown darkened. “I am not. What a load of nonsense.”

She eyed him. “You know, you sound really stressed. I bet that’s not the first mug of coffee you’ve had today, is it?”

His expression answered her.

“That mug must hold three cups, at least. Caffeine is another stress inducer.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “Is that right?”

“Absolutely. You really should consider cutting back.”

“Or maybe throwing you out of my office, which would also relieve my stress level,” he pointed out.

She laughed. “Really? Okay, fair enough. It was rude of me to come in here and point out your commitment problems.”

He shrugged. “Actually, it doesn’t matter. Your analysis is incorrect, anyway.”

“Fine,” she said, and waved a hand with airy unconcern. “I’m sure you’re right. You’re not commitment phobic. Any year now you’ll take the plunge and after all, you’re only, what, thirty-five?”

He ignored the question. “And what makes you an expert on all this female psychobabble stuff?”

Deborah shrugged. She could tell him she’d majored in psychology, which might make him sit up and pay attention. But since no amount of creative math could turn foreign languages plus education into psychology, she contented herself with giving him a Mona Lisa smile. “I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Maybe not yesterday, but pretty damned close,” he muttered. Her eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re too young to know much about men or relationships.”

Deborah raised her brows at him in imitation of his own habit.

"I'm twenty-seven, and that's a very pompous thing to say." Why was she surprised?

"Twenty-seven?" Shock showed in the bottle-green eyes.

"Yes. How old are you?" Would he tell her? Not that she really cared how old he was, of course. Cameron Lyle didn't interest her. But she deserved to know his age since he knew hers. It was the principle of the thing.

"Thirty-one," he said. "Are you sure you're twenty-seven?" He looked her over, his gaze lingering on her face.

No prizes for guessing what he saw. Blue eyes, slightly rounded pink cheeks and wisps of blond hair escaping from her ponytail. Nothing special. Definitely not a sophisticated picture, either. She was getting tired of comments about not looking her age.

"You look barely out of college," he added, still looking stunned.

Several pithy retorts came to mind, but with great effort Deborah ignored them all. "We were talking about you," she reminded him.

"Maybe we were, but we're not anymore. You know absolutely nothing about the situation." Cameron sent her a steely-eyed glance that said she wasn't getting any more information out of him. "You're just feeling hostile toward men right now, and you're taking it out on me."

"I'm not feeling hostile." Relieved was the word. It was scary how close she'd come to marrying Mark.

Cameron raised a brow. "Yes, you are. You're also highly annoyed that you're stuck going to my party."

Deborah pulled a face. That part she couldn't deny.

He chuckled. "Cheer up. I'll take you shopping and we'll find you a dress that will make the whole ordeal bearable for you."

She frowned. "Shopping?" She shouldn't be so horrified. No doubt there were many things that would be more awful than a shopping trip with this man.

Major surgery and death were the first two that came to mind.

Any shopping she and Cameron Lyle did together would entail nonstop arguments. If she paid any attention to his opinions, she'd wind up with the world's most tasteful and most boring dress, one that would put her into a coma as soon as she saw herself in the mirror.

"Yes, shopping," he said. "I know a good boutique just up the street."

Rags to Riches. Stella's shop. Deborah winced. The gossips would have a field day. It didn't bear thinking about.

"No shopping," she said. "I don't need a dress, and even if I did, I certainly wouldn't need you to help me pick it out." Did he want to make sure she matched the napkins?

"I'm sure you wouldn't. And I guess I could reimburse you later, but using my credit card seems easier."

He planned to pay? Shock kept her silent for several seconds, but then she swallowed the anger that rose in her throat. Why was she surprised he was the type who liked throwing his money

around?

“You’re not paying for my dress.” Deborah said it slowly and succinctly, so there would be no ambiguity.

He looked surprised. “Why not? You’re hostessing my party for me. Consider this one of the job’s perks. I assure you, I can easily afford it.”

“That’s not the point,” she said tightly. How many different ways could this man find to insult her? No wonder her sense of humor took a hike every time he opened his mouth.

She met his gaze and Deborah could see that he honestly had no idea he was insulting her. Men! She could see it right now. There she’d be, parading in front of him in evening dresses, each more skimpy than the last. Watching his gaze move slowly over her. Standing next to him while he paid for one of them. Just like one of his interchangeable girlfriends.

Every nerve in her body twitched. “No.”

Cameron’s formidable jaw set. “Anybody ever tell you how stubborn you are?”

“All the time, when I was a teenager.”

You’re so stubborn, Deborah. She could still hear her father’s voice, filled with exasperation.

And hear herself, slamming her bedroom door.

“Most women would jump at the chance to buy a new dress,” Cameron pointed out.

“I’m not most women.” And she was definitely not his woman. Buying her a dress would probably mean nothing to Cameron,

but Deborah knew how she would feel.

Bought. Owned.

“Don’t forget, you’ll need to look older than Heather,” he pointed out. “I take it you have a suitable dress?” He looked doubtful, leaving her to wonder how he thought she’d define the word suitable.

Deborah suspected she knew the answer to that question. Cameron imagined her to be an artsy, naïve type who thought dangly earrings were the height of sophistication. The rise of his brows and the slow progress of his gaze over her sweatshirt and leggings confirmed her suspicions. He probably figured she’d show up in tiered ruffles looking like his date for the prom.

Deborah sent him a bland smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep my ruffled pink-and-orange floral in the closet.”

The look on his face made her smile all the way back to her apartment.

## Chapter Four

Everything Cam knew about Deborah Clark made one fact stunningly clear.

Unengaged or not, she was still off-limits to him.

Cam stood outside her apartment door and took in her well-scrubbed, fresh girl-next-door look. This girl—woman—did not have much experience with men.

For once she wasn't wearing her usual uniform of leggings paired with a long, baggy and very bright top. Today she wore a black suit that contrasted well with her golden hair. Even though it followed her curves faithfully, the suit itself was conservative enough. Combined as it was with pumps and tasteful hoop earrings, it would be at home in any of the city's office buildings.

Except for the fuchsia blouse she wore with it. Startling in color and design, the blouse was pure Deborah, a splash of individuality in the midst of conformity.

Her blouse made him want to smile, and so did her hair. She wore her usual ponytail, except that today she'd put one of those scrunched-up fabric things around it. But if she thought a black hair accessory made for a more sophisticated look, he had news for her, because in spite of her business gear, Deborah still looked about sixteen. Cute—very cute...

"Hi," Cam said after a long pause.

Her gaze met his and he thought he saw a small flicker of

awareness in the bright blue depths, but he couldn't tell, because she gave him only a brief glance before striding over to her desk and rummaging through it. "I'll be right with you. I'm running a little late this morning." Her voice had a brisk, electric quality to it, as if she was primed and ready for action.

"I guess you have somewhere else you need to be," he observed in the most neutral tones he could come up with. He was stating the obvious, of course, since he had never seen her in a suit before.

"Only at lunchtime. I've still got an hour." Deborah stopped rummaging through her desk and took a folder out of the filing cabinet in the corner of her living room. Her movements were quick and decisive.

Cam heard a faint sound and turned his head toward it. In stark contrast to her owner's energized appearance, Libby lay stretched out on the sofa, fast asleep. The cat's white belly rose and fell in a slow, gentle rhythm.

Cam's gaze returned to Deborah. Everything about her seemed sharper, more focused. She crackled with electricity.

Whatever this lunch was about, it meant a lot to her.

What could be so important to Deborah Clark, who seemed to take nothing seriously? He had no idea. But judging from her business dress, it had something to do with work.

Work. The reason he was here.

"Why don't you show me what you have so far?" Cam kept his gaze away from her gracefully crossed legs.



The party was still nearly two weeks away, which allowed him plenty of time to troubleshoot. Also, it was not a crucial business function, so there was a margin for error. Just as long as error didn't turn into disaster. Making sure that didn't happen was, of course, why he was here.

Deborah handed him a folder. "I still think you should consider a more interesting décor than a few floral arrangements, but if you're sure that's all you want...."

"I'm sure." Cam flipped through the folder and felt his amazement grow with every page. He suppressed a whistle.

She'd done a hell of a lot in a short time period. She'd done it well, too, judging by the very organized looking checklists, detailed vendor information and the variety of menu suggestions she included. It was all there, in what seemed to him the minutest of details.

Her chuckle made him look up. Cam found her amused eyes on him, and he realized his surprise must be obvious. To cover his discomfort, he lifted a brow in polite inquiry.

"Go ahead and admit it. You're floored I can make lists. I assure you, it's a common reaction. Especially from people who don't know me very well." Her smile was gentle but pointed, tinged faintly with challenge.

Cam got the message. And she had a point. He didn't know her well. In fact, he was beginning to suspect he didn't know her at all. The thought made him uneasy.

"You don't seem like a list maker," he said.

"I'm not, in private life. But details are crucial in my line of work, because people feel strongly about special occasions. When you commit to planning someone's party, you've got to get it right the first time. You owe your client the best event you can possibly produce." Deborah didn't look amused anymore.

Cam stared at her. She looked more intense than he'd ever seen her. And her voice sounded unfamiliar. He heard enthusiasm and something else he couldn't identify.

"What many people don't understand," she continued, "is that details make all the difference in the world. They can transform an ordinary event into a truly spectacular one. And when you have the chance to create something memorable, you have to run with it, because you don't get second chances in event planning."

She leaned toward him. "It's not like selling clothes or coffee mugs, which can be exchanged if the customer isn't satisfied. Events are totally different. Whatever happens, you've got to make them right, because if they go wrong, you can't just tell clients and their guests to come back the following night."

Cam stared at her. Passion. That was it. That was what he heard in her voice.

"I guess not," he murmured. He'd never thought of it that way before. He'd also never imagined Deborah could be this intense about any topic, especially a work-related one. The laid-back, free-spirited attitude she usually projected hadn't prepared him for this kind of emotion.

Nothing had prepared him for his own reaction to it, either. He

found himself wondering what it would be like if all her intensity were focused on him instead of work.

Deborah cleared her throat. "Sorry. I get a little carried away sometimes." She looked away, which was fine with Cam since it gave him more opportunity to study her.

It was strange the way her intensity had given her face a more mature cast. For a moment there, she'd looked fully adult. Deborah Clark was more interesting than he could have guessed. Cam watched her face as she wrote something on a tablet from her desk. She looked uncomfortable, as if she'd said too much. Which wasn't true. What she'd said didn't matter nearly as much as the way she'd said it. Now that was interesting.

"Anything else you'd like to discuss?" she asked.

Plenty. But he knew she was talking about his party. "It looks like I can safely leave it all to you," he said, and found that he meant it. Her job might be the only thing she took seriously, but he couldn't doubt her dedication to her work.

"Good," she said, and waited.

It didn't take much to figure out she was waiting for him to leave. Cam got up. In the lengthening silence, he searched for something else to say. The plain, bald truth was that he didn't want to go yet. He wanted to hear her talk some more about her work. He wanted to see that peculiar intensity light up her eyes again. He wanted to hear more passion in her voice.

But he shouldn't be thinking about any of that. Just because she turned out to be seriously, intensely, interested in her work,

there was no reason to forget one undeniable fact.

Deborah Clark was an innocent and therefore off-limits to him. Period. End of story.

So he should head on out of here pronto. He should send Barb to lunch, grab a sandwich and a big mug of coffee for himself and get some of that ungodly mound of paperwork cleared off his desk.

“Who are you having lunch with?” he asked instead.

In the beat of silence that followed, Cam stifled a wince. How had that come out of his mouth? He never blurted out things. And he never asked nosy questions. That was Deborah’s province. She was the one who grilled people about their love lives, nailing them to the wall and demanding to know if they’d been ditched. Were her habits rubbing off on him?

Perish the thought.

He wasn’t worried about making her uncomfortable. After all, she’d gotten some definite mileage the other day out of his own embarrassment. And at least he wasn’t pronouncing her commitment-phobic into the bargain. In fact, compared to her grilling, his small question was downright genteel.

No, he didn’t mind embarrassing her a little. Girl or woman, Deborah could take care of herself. But he minded very much knowing that he’d lost control enough to ask a question he’d already decided he wasn’t going to ask. He also minded her knowing about his curiosity.

Deborah was looking at him in almost comical surprise, as if

she was just as floored as he was by his question.

“A client,” she said after a moment.

“A client?” His head felt a little strange. Must be the last of the indiscretion-related shock waves reverberating in his brain.

“Well, maybe a client,” Deborah amended. “He’s the owner of a local clothing chain, and he’s looking for someone to plan shareholders’ meetings.” She said it casually, but her eyes glowed with suppressed excitement. Twin dots of pink stained her cheeks. She looked cute again, which was a relief.

“This could be a big deal for your company, then,” Cam noted, ignoring the small voice inside him that said she hadn’t looked cute a few minutes ago. She’d looked vibrant and beautiful.

Passionate.

“It could, yes,” she agreed.

“Congratulations.”

Deborah shook her head. “I haven’t gotten the contract yet.” But she was smiling, and Cam had the feeling she expected to get it. And why shouldn’t she? As far as he could tell, she did good work. She probably had a perfectly good business head on her shoulders.

Cam watched her cross to the sofa and pick up her coat and purse. That was when he noticed that Libby was still stretched out in the same position she’d been in when he arrived.

“Your cat’s not exactly energetic, is she?” he observed.

Deborah surveyed her pet with a small, indulgent smile. “No.”

“Isn’t it time for her morning walk?” It was eleven o’clock,

just about the time the cat had shown up in his office. That day seemed a lot longer ago than only five weeks.

She looked puzzled. "What morning walk?"

"I thought she went out every morning," Cam said.

Deborah shook her head. "No. Libby doesn't venture out much. In fact, the day you found her, she'd escaped while I was in the shower, and I had no idea she'd gotten out."

That explained a lot. It explained not only Deborah's surprise when he'd handed over the cat, but also the little details he'd noticed at the time, like her damp, tousled hair and her glowing skin.

Little details he'd tried to forget.

"Cats aren't like dogs," Deborah pointed out. "You don't walk them every morning." Once more she looked amused.

"I don't know much about cats," Cam said. "We always had dogs when I was growing up."

"But you don't now." She still looked disappointed about his dogless state, and even knowing her disappointment was only that she was stuck hostessing his party instead of walking his dog, Cam found himself taking it personally.

"That's right. Now I have fish," he told her with a firm cheerfulness.

Her brows shot up. "Fish?"

Cam frowned.

"Sorry," Deborah muttered. "You just don't look like a fish person."

He stared at her.

"I'm sure you're wondering what a fish person looks like," she continued. "And I'd have to say I have no idea, but I pictured you with a very large dog."

"My fish are the tropical kind," he told her. "I like to watch them, especially when I'm trying to figure out a business problem. They're soothing." He grinned. "You still look doubtful. Don't you like fish?"

She shrugged. "They're not furry, which is a major pet criterion for me. Also, you can't train them."

"You can't train cats, either," Cam felt obliged to point out.

"Of course you can." As she provided him with examples it became clear that he'd hit on a powerful topic. She looked as if she'd completely forgotten about her business lunch. "You just have to make a few allowances for personality quirks," she finished.

"Hmm. I know what you mean," he said after a moment. "One of my fish is like that. Very quirky."

"Really?" She looked even more doubtful than before, and a little suspicious, too, as if she thought he might be putting her on.

Cam nodded. "Herbie. What a grump."

She blinked. "Did you name all your fish?" Her tone sounded carefully neutral.

"No. He's the only one who has much personality, to tell you the truth. He's almost the smallest one in the tank, but he's aggressive. He chases everyone else around." Cam watched her

grin. Cute was a safer look for her than the passionate expression she'd worn a few minutes ago. A few thoughts about her cuteness were not going to get either of them in trouble.

"Shouldn't you be going to your lunch?" he asked.

Deborah shot a look at her watch. "Yes, I should. I've got just enough time to get there. Anyway, I guess I'll meet your fish before too long," she added, "because I'll need to see your house—the kitchen, the party site, et cetera—as soon as possible so I can plan the setup."

"Fine." For some reason he was actually looking forward to showing her around. "How about ten on Saturday morning?"

"I'll be there."

Cam smiled in satisfaction.

DEBORAH PULLED UP outside Cameron's house and gazed at it for a while. Her surprise that he lived outside of the city instead of in a posh neighborhood was nothing compared to the shock his house gave her.

It was large but not ostentatiously so. She'd imagined a huge modern monstrosity with pillars, intricate landscaping and a pool, but it wasn't like that. In fact, Cameron's house wasn't at all what she'd expected from a man as wealthy as he was, a man who made such a big splash in Indianapolis society.

It was a normal house. Understated, even. The two-story structure had wood on top and limestone on the bottom. Painted a green that matched the trees and bushes surrounding it, the house looked natural, as if it belonged there in the woods.



As Deborah got out of the car, she caught a movement from behind the big picture window, and then the front door opened and Cameron came down the walk. He looked relaxed in tan corduroys and a cream polo shirt.

As always, up close he was even bigger than she remembered, one of few men whose height forced her to tilt her head up. At five ten, Deborah wasn't used to feeling small and vulnerable. She didn't like it, either.

Maybe she should wear business suits all the time around this man. Having armor had certainly helped on Wednesday. Even though the intensity of his gaze had made her as uncomfortable as it always did, the knowledge that she looked pulled together had steadied her. For the first time since she'd met Cameron Lyle, her tongue hadn't run away with her. Well, except for her little lecture on event planning, but she could never control herself on that topic, no matter who she was talking to, so that didn't count.

"Nice place," Deborah told him. Her voice sounded too hearty, but at least she wasn't babbling. She'd been to lots of clients' houses, but this was the first time she'd planned an event for someone she was attracted to. Add that fact to the unfortunate truth that she had never in her life been this attracted to any man, and you had a recipe for possible disaster.

Getting this party over with would be a huge relief.

Meanwhile, planning it gave her something to think about besides the depressing news she'd received yesterday.

"Thanks. Come on in." Cameron guided her inside, one hand

between her shoulder blades, and she was way too aware of the warmth of his hand on her back. Deborah swallowed, but then the view caught her attention and she gasped.

She was looking at woods again, because the entire far wall was glass. The house sat on a hill, so through the glass she saw a large deck, and beyond it, sloping masses of evergreens. Sunlight reflected off the thin layer of snow remaining on the ground, and bright red cardinals were busy at the birdfeeders on the deck. The tranquil scene was straight from a Christmas card.

“It’s beautiful,” Deborah said finally.

“You like it?” Cameron looked pleased by her reaction. His smile lightened his features and made him even more dangerously attractive. Unlike some of the smiles he’d given her in the past, this one reached his eyes. As always, their vivid green gave her a small shock of pleasure.

“Yes, I do.” She moved away from the window. Away from him.

Business. That was what she was here for.

“You should have told me you have an incredible view.” Deborah heard the accusation in her voice, but she couldn’t suppress it.

Cameron raised a brow. “Why?”

“Because with built-in décor like this, we could do something really spectacular.” The mere thought of the ho-hum floral arrangements they’d settled on made her want to gnash her teeth. What a wasted opportunity.

Something of what she felt must have shown on her face, because he was watching her intently. “Such as...?”

“Such as a winter scene that incorporates the view from your glass wall.” The more she thought about it, the more excited Deborah got. “A park, for example. A beautiful, snowy park.”

“A snowy park?” Cameron looked around his living room, skepticism clearly written on his face. That was understandable, since his living room featured hardwood floors and comfortable, overstuffed furniture in warm shades of brown, apricot and beige. Nothing about the room suggested a park in the middle of winter.

But it would when she was finished with it.

“Trust me, it can be done. We’ll have to hustle, since we’ve only got ten days left, but fortunately, all we’re changing is the décor. And I have the perfect supplier.”

He shook his head. “No. We can’t change the décor.”

Deborah met his gaze squarely. “You could have a truly fantastic, memorable event here, one your guests will talk about for years.”

He watched her with unreadable eyes. “What if I prefer a sensible, traditional event?”

She took a deep breath. There was no point in getting bent out of shape. This man was, after all, the client. He had to be comfortable with the event design.

Deborah inclined her head. “If you really want something traditional, that’s what we’ll go with.”

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